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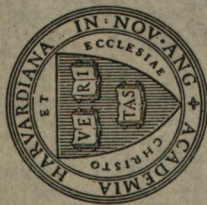
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BY JAMES PAYN

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IN THREE VOLUMES.—VOL. III.

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"After all, man is man ; he is not wicked, and he is not good ; by no means white as snow, but by no means black as coal ; black *and* white, piebald, striped, dubious."—SWINBURNE.

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LESS BLACK THAN WE'RE PAINTED.

CHAPTER I.

AN ATTEMPT AT MEDIATION.

PERHAPS the most significant proof of the disgrace that attached to the memory of George Parkes was that all Durnton folk began to pity his widow. She had, as we have seen, been the especial object of Mrs. Freeman's contempt and suspicion, and the contempt had been shared by most of her neighbours. They had never forgiven the pretty widow her insane folly in throwing herself away on such a ne'er-do-well as Parkes, and had hitherto thought she 'deserved all she got;' 'she had made her own

bed, and must lie on it,' etc., etc. But now they perceived that her punishment must have been severe beyond anything they had imagined. She had been mated, it now appeared, not only with a violent and lawless ruffian, but with a burglar, who had narrowly escaped being a murderer, and who, if he had not been drowned, would certainly have come to the gallows. That all was over with that attachment of the Squire's son to the step-daughter of such a scoundrel was taken for granted, as Richard saw, by everybody.

'The poor boy can neither be so mad nor so bad as to go on with it,' said Mrs. Freeman, and she expressed the general sentiment; and when Annie left the village it was felt that the last tie between him and the family at the spinney cottage was severed.

Richard, too, felt something of this himself, though his heart was still loyal to Lucy. In a month or two, when the term agreed upon for their mutual silence should be ended, he must write to her of course;

but he hardly knew what he should say. He secretly hoped that the girl would write first to him, which would release him—at all events from a great embarrassment. His own conviction was that she would herself cancel their engagement, in which case he would not endeavour to renew it. The Fates would then have too obviously declared against him to admit of a further struggle. If he could have seen her—nay, if he had only possessed the photograph which had aroused Mrs. Drummond's jealousy, matters might have been different (George Parkes had well understood that); but as it was, he wavered in his mind.

No one spoke to him about Lucy, nor even about George (if they had, he would no doubt have made what excuses for the man were possible); but this very absence of antagonistic feeling was proof that in their judgment there was no longer any one to contend against. The Rector was blandly cheerful, and proposed various schemes of entertainment; rides to 'remarkable places' in the neighbourhood,

and attendance at the great missionary meeting in the Town Hall at Swanborough, where a real African chief (converted), was to dance a new dance with the double club.

The Squire's manner to his son had grown demonstratively tender ; hitherto he had ignored his affair with Lucy altogether, as a boyish absurdity ; but now that it must needs be all over—if the lad was but sane—Mr. Talbot exhibited a certain pity for him. It was while matters were in this condition, and still a few weeks remained before Richard was free to reopen communications with Lucy, that he received the following letter from Aunt Edith :

‘ MY DEAR DICK ’ (she never called him by that name, save when she was exceptionally pleased with him, or when she was about to try his patience or good feeling ; and at the mere sight of the word his sinking heart suggested to him what was coming),—‘ I have seen dear Lucy ’ (there was another blow ; she would never have called her ‘ dear ’ if all chance of her

becoming 'near' to her had not been over), 'and she bids me write to you instead of her. She is sure you will forgive her (as I am) for employing a substitute to say that all must needs now be over between her and you. Even as it is, she feels a bitter pang, for she loved you truly; so truly that nothing would have induced her to do you a mischief that she herself believed to be one. She and I, you know, have differed widely upon this point, dear Richard, but now there is no room for difference. Her honest pride, as well as her honest love, compels her to break off her engagement with you under present circumstances. You may say, "She is innocent;" that is true. I will add that her character has something of true nobility in it; but to marry her would be to ally yourself with unspeakable disgrace. I send her love to you—though she does not bid me do so—for the love of such a girl I believe can do you no harm, any more than a good man's blessing on his death-bed. She is dead to you henceforth, Richard; it must

be so, and she sees it must. Forbear then, I entreat you, to take any steps to move her from her just resolve. They would be useless, and they would inflict severest pain. I send by the next post, at her request, the locket which you gave her. I opened it—was it sacrilege, Richard?—and have been looking at the face within it. It is an honest face, and, I am sure, a kind one. I am prejudiced in its possessor's favour, because he is dear to me; but I think he respects honour and duty. These point the same way henceforth, dear boy, though heretofore it may have seemed to you that they were in opposition. Honour now demands your acquiescence in Lucy's resolve that you should henceforth be strangers, for would it not be base to give her pain? Duty, as before, compels you to obey your father. I make no personal appeal to you, dear Dick, for it would be out of place; let me count myself—though I hope I am something more—merely among your friends and well-wishers, I know you will not hesitate to accept the

inevitable, neither passionately nor morosely, but in a gentle spirit. I have heard with sorrow that your father is not well ; if I know you, you will not aggravate his physical pain by mental trouble. God bless you, and keep you and comfort you, is the prayer of your loving aunt,

‘EDITH TALBOT.’

Richard was not given to tears, but this letter drew them from his eyes ; his pity for himself was so overwhelming.

He pitied Lucy too ; but it must be confessed that her renunciation of him did not awaken the feelings which it ought to have done—or, at all events, to the due extent. His *amour propre* was wounded. He could not after all, he thought, have been so dear to her as she had been to him, or no consideration would have persuaded her to give him up, for he would have stuck to *her* at all risks.

The letter, in fact, had exactly the effect it was designed to produce, though the means were not such as the writer had

calculated upon. What she had said about his father, however, perhaps suggested to Richard his 'throwing up the sponge'—since it must be so—with a good grace. When he had recovered himself a little from the first shock he walked straight into the library and placed Edith's letter in his father's hand.

The Squire received him with a smile, which faded away as his eye glanced at the envelope. 'This is some communication from your aunt, I see; does it concern me in any way?' inquired he, indifferently.

'Yes, sir; both you and me,' replied Richard.

The Squire read the letter to the end without comment.

Then, 'Well, my boy, you see the wisdom of this advice, I hope?' he said.

'Yes, sir; I have given Lucy up. It is all over,' said Richard, looking the very picture of despair and woe.

'Poor boy——good boy,' said the Squire softly. 'I am sorry you have given yourself such pain.'

‘And I am sorry, sir, to have given you pain. You shall have no more trouble with me henceforth.’

Richard meant nothing but dutifulness, but his tone was so melancholy that one would have thought he meant to die, and so preclude all further parental solicitude.

‘I grudge no trouble for you, dear boy,’ returned his father, laying his hand on the lad’s shoulder, ‘nor time, nor money, nor anything I have to give. I live for you alone.’

‘Dear father.’

For the first time since that inexplicable cloud had come between the boy and the man these two stood heart to heart.

‘Is there anything—anything, Dick, that I can do for you, to show how dear you are to me?’

‘No, father, for that requires no proof. And yet,’ added he, with a sudden impulse, ‘there is something—it is not for me exactly—but——’

‘If it is for any one dear to you ; for any one to whom you are indebted, or fancy

yourself to be so, it shall be all the same as though it were yourself, Richard.'

The Squire's mind had at once reverted to Lucy. If the boy had asked for a thousand pounds for her, he would have freely given it.

'Yes, it is for some one dear to me, and to whom I am deeply indebted. Father, pray forgive Aunt Edith.'

If the fabled Lamia had taken her serpent shape just as her ripe lips were being pressed to those of her lover, he could scarcely have exhibited a greater change of mien than did the Squire as he heard these words; he did not indeed start back from his boy in absolute loathing, but he drew himself up stiff and stern, like a man of stone.

'To any request in reason, Richard, I shall be happy to listen,' said he coldly; 'but you should not meddle with matters of which you have no knowledge.'

'I know, sir, that Aunt Edith has been most kind to me,' urged Richard simply; 'and I know that it is most distressing to

her that you and she, being brother and sister——’

‘Be silent, boy,’ interrupted the Squire angrily. ‘I will not be schooled by you. If the woman of whom you speak had had her way, you would have been a beggar—do you hear?—a beggar.’

Richard heard, of course, but he scarcely believed his ears.

‘That seems so strange, sir——’

‘It is true, boy, for all that,’ continued the other. ‘If you have not heard it from my lips before, it was because I flattered myself that you would have given your father credit for having good reasons for a course of conduct which might otherwise seem strange. It appears, however, that you have preferred to listen to one, the very atmosphere of whose being is falsehood and duplicity. Your aunt may call herself what she likes—“Sister,” forsooth, is the name she deems the fittest, because she has behaved so little like one—but she is Jesuit to the core. There, let us have no more of it; I am sorry you must needs

have mentioned her at such a time. Her letter, it is true, is well enough—you need not say that I have seen it—but read your Bible, and you will find what sort are those who compass sea and land to gain one proselyte.'

The force and fire with which Mr. Talbot spoke, appeared to have exhausted him, for he here sank down into his chair, and uttered a deep sigh.

'You are not well, father; can I do nothing for you?' said Richard tenderly, alarmed at the change that had come over the Squire's face.

'No. I shall be better presently—if I am left alone.'

At this hint Richard withdrew at once, amazed and even shocked. In the passage he met the Rector, who had just come to pay his usual morning visit to the Tower. He took him into a neighbouring room and told him all from first to last. 'My father, it is clear, is not himself,' he added, 'and I fear he is far from well.'

'He is as well as he will ever be,

Richard,' answered the other gravely. 'Let what you have seen to-day be a warning to you not to vex him.'

'I did not mean to vex him, but quite otherwise. What can be the meaning of his detestation of poor Aunt Edith? I am sure you do not think as he does, that she is false and deceitful.'

The Rector winced; for though he did not think so now, he had been very recently of that opinion.

'She has, at all events,' he said, 'unfortunately allied herself with very deceitful people.'

'She is my father's own flesh and blood,' urged Richard; 'his own sister.'

'If you read your Bible, Richard,' was the Rector's grave reply, 'you will find that the contentions between brethren are as "the bars of a castle."'

But though thus twice referred to Holy Writ for an explanation of this social problem, it still remained to Richard an unsolved one. Not being a theologian, he could not understand this virulence of feel-

ing between two persons of the same kith and kin ; and even if he had been one, there would have remained a certain *residuum* of ill-feeling, not to be accounted for by the mere rivalry of creeds.



CHAPTER II.

DOWN HILL.

THERE were many things that now conspired together to make the house of Richard Talbot anything but what home should be, and, indeed, well-nigh intolerable to him. His father's momentary burst of tenderness, checked and, as it were, frozen by the boy's generous attempt to bring Aunt Edith into favour with her kinsman, did not recur ; he fell once more into his sombre and solitary ways. It was clear to Richard that his presence at the Tower was no comfort to the Squire, and it was certainly no pleasure to himself. The house was gloomy and lifeless ; the village was full of painful memories of her who had become dead to him, without any

of the solace that springs from death, and which, like the flowers on the grave, keeps our thoughts of those who lie beneath it sweet and fragrant. He regretted her, but without resignation. If inexorable fate had separated them for ever, he could have borne it better ; but she had voluntarily abandoned him, and he had sullenly acquiesced in the estrangement. If he had not been angry with her, he might even still have sought to renew their attachment ; but, as it was, the thing was done, and every voice said it was well done—save the whisper of his own heart.

Even his old pleasures of the woods and fields were now become distasteful to him, for they were associated with one who had been the final cause of his misfortune. As to the river, he never went near it ; even in its distant murmur he seemed to hear the miserable cries of a drowning man ; its waters were as the waters of death.

The end of the Christmas vacation, which brought good-bye to home and father, Richard, therefore, hailed with joy.

1a He returned to college, however, another man—or it will be, perhaps, sufficient to say a man. His boyish instincts, affections, amusements, had perished, and by violence; and he had suddenly arrived at man's estate, though in wisdom far from maturity. Up to this time his aimless, idle ways had done him little harm; the river and the cricket-field had acted as safety-valves to his restless temperament, but wholesome relaxations of this kind offered him no longer any attraction. He took to cards and billiards, and such dissipations as the University affords. He made his first book at the Spring Races at Newmarket, and became a fast man. To judge by what came of its dissolution, indeed, one would have said that Mr. Freeman had not been far wrong in Richard's case with respect to the influence for good of 'a virtuous attachment.'

In losing his Lucy he seemed to have lost his sheet-anchor, and began to drift towards the 'dogs.' Not, indeed, that he sank so low as to become literally 'doggy,' a

patron of bull pups, which is the lowest type of the fast undergraduate ; but he became 'horsey,' which, when unaccompanied with a real devotion to field sports, is almost as bad. He had the odds on the Derby and Oaks on the tip of his tongue, and talked of 'Cambyses' year' as though it marked the epoch of an event of more importance than most things in the history of mankind. Who does not know the symptoms of the young gentleman recently inoculated with the hoof-and-mouth disease—the passion for the Turf—whose rubric is the 'meetings for the year,' and whose Bible is the Racing Calendar ? It is one of the most melancholy forms of moral delusion, and in youth the saddest of all, since the one earnest thing about it is the desire—it must be allowed, very seldom gratified—of acquiring gain at the expense of others. I sometimes think that the mighty mind of Swift, when he wrote his 'History of the Houyhnhnms,' must have been endowed with prescience, and have figured allegorically what has come to pass among us in

respect to the Turf. So much is the horse, in what some call 'the best circles,' set above the man.

Mr. Greene's ridicule of the equine superstition was a mitigating circumstance, but he could not prevent his young friend from making considerable sacrifices—for which the Squire had to pay—to the four-footed god. As to his other extravagances, his mentor could exercise little or no restraint over them. At Richard's rooms were now found the most expensive wines, and young gentlemen who talked with gravity about 'the vintages'; cigars half a foot long, and with brands whose names corresponded with their length; and pictures and statues, principally of the female sex, the cost of which, though great, was certainly not enhanced by the amount of their drapery. On seeing Talbot's 'rooms' for the first time after this gorgeous transformation, Mr. Greene (in the character of Christopher Sly) cried, 'For Heaven's sake, Dick, a sup of small beer.' Dick answered, naïvely, that he had no small beer, and

produced a pint of the very driest champagne as a substitute.

‘What a thing it is to have a father and a Tower!’ observed the other, as he sipped it.

And indeed Mr. Talbot, senior, never uttered a remonstrance, whatever bills came in, though his son’s liberal allowance was now all expended on necessities—such as debts of honour—and had quite lost its original uses. When Richard wrote to ask leave to spend the next vacation with his friend Greene, at his guardian’s house near London, he not only received the desired permission, but a cheque for extraneous expenses; and I am sorry to say, though the young gentleman was grateful, he also felt that it was a relief to his father to hear that he would pass the holidays away from home. There was no actual bad feeling between the two, nor could it be fairly said that ‘there were faults on both sides;’ there were rather misfortunes.

During the vacation, Richard for the first time saw ‘Life’—as the whirl of

metropolitan dissipation has been ludicrously termed—and on the whole enjoyed it. For such a purpose Leonard Greene was the most agreeable of companions, and by no means a bad one—supposing it was necessary to see such Life at all—in a moral sense. His appreciation of humour was so keen that vice under its influence lost much of her varnish in Richard's eyes ; it is not advisable even to gallop through the mud, but there is ever so much of difference between that and wallowing in it. Greene was ignorant of most things really worth knowing, almost to sublimity, though from his natural prudence (he never spoke, if he could help it, of what he did not understand) and his acute instinct, he seemed to know more than he did. He was, also, what serious persons would, and do, call flippant, and yet he was so genuine, as well as genial, that he made friends in the most unexpected quarters. Richard took him to Gresham Street, and introduced him to Lady Earnshaw and Aunt Edith, and the former was quite delighted with him.

'I always like nice boys,' she said, 'and should have fallen in love with Dick, only you see' (here she sighed) 'he was my grandson.'

Aunt Edith looked very grave at this, as a sort of side blow at the prayer-book. If she should ever come to like Richard's friend it would be, she thought, only for Richard's sake, for he seemed as gay and thoughtless as a butterfly. She knew, however, that he had behaved well and wisely in the matter of Lucy.

Lady Earnshaw asked the two young men to dinner : and took the opportunity of inviting Mr. Vane also, not because she liked him any better than of old, but because it was necessary to ask him sometimes out of compliment to Edith, and anything was better than having the man alone. Richard took care to warn his humorous friend of the question that was sure to be put to Duncombe when dinner was announced : 'Does not his lordship dine at home ?' with his stereotyped reply of 'No, my lady.' But it would have been

better for Mr. Greene had he omitted the precaution, for the idea so tickled that young gentleman beforehand that he nearly choked in the cab on the way to Gresham Street, and when the interrogatory was put was seized with such a fit of coughing that her ladyship was quite alarmed for his life. He afterwards likened the scene to the children's game of 'Is the Emperor of Morocco dead?' which has to be carried on without a smile.

Mr. Vane's fashion of addressing Miss Talbot as Sister Edith, and the manifest contempt it evoked from his hostess, was also a great trial to Mr. Greene's gravity. But on the whole he acquitted himself very creditably, and by his marvellous tact succeeded before the meal was over in removing the prejudice of his neighbour, Miss Talbot, against him. She even said to him, when the others happened to be engaged in talk, 'We are all greatly indebted to you, Mr. Greene, for the course you took with respect to poor Richard's engagement.' He answered that he had but done what

was obviously right, and only regretted that his services had been so valueless. The young woman herself had, it seemed, got Dick out of the scrape.

‘That is true,’ said Edith; but the confession was made with such evident reluctance, that he could not help inquiring whether it was not true that she had behaved well in the matter.

‘Yes,’ said Edith, ‘I have nothing to say against her on that score.’

‘Do you know what has become of the young lady?’ asked Mr. Greene, his curiosity still piqued by the tone of her reply.

‘Yes—at least, no,’ she answered hurriedly. ‘It is a sad story.’

‘I am sorry indeed,’ said Greene, and his voice betrayed that he spoke truth.

They were silent for a while, during which a dispute was carried on between Mr. Vane and Richard concerning public schools (which were not in favour with the former) that seemed to afford Lady Earnshaw much amusement.

Presently said Edith, speaking in a low tone, 'I should be very sorry if I have given you a worse impression of Lucy Lindon, Mr. Greene, than I intended to convey. I know nothing against her character, but she has taken a step that has much displeased me, and distressed a tried and true friend of hers, her aunt. She has gone on the stage.'

'On the stage!' echoed Greene, with vivacity; 'dear me, which is her theatre?'

'I know nothing about that,' answered Edith severely; 'nor do I want to know. The fact is, the poor woman, her aunt, was prepared to make—and indeed did make—the greatest possible sacrifice for her, in order to prevent her taking so every way prejudicial a step. She would have been a guardian angel to the girl if only she would have permitted her. But she has taken her own way, and nothing but ill can come of it.'

'Dear, dear!' said Mr. Greene, with sympathy. But the fact was his curiosity was greatly excited, and he determined to

read the theatrical announcements in the newspapers next morning with especial care.

‘You will not say a word of what I have been telling you to Richard,’ were Edith’s last words as she rose from the table.

‘Not a syllable, Miss Talbot ; we never speak upon that subject ; but your wish, in any case, would seal my lips.’

In spite of his light ways, Edith felt somehow that Mr. Greene had a good heart, and was a gentleman.

Lady Earnshaw went much further ; she expressed her opinion when Edith and she had retired to the drawing-room that the young man was ‘delightful.’ She pointed out how hard it must have been for him with his liveliness and love of fun to have left Masham Manor to stay at the Tower ‘with Francis and his doldrums’—so she termed her son-in-law’s spiritual gloom—in order to keep company with Richard during his love-fever. ‘A pretty time he must have had of it, with the society of that canting Mr. Freeman and the mur-

derous gamekeeper for his only distractions.'

Over the dessert, the object of these eulogiums found it rather more difficult to make himself agreeable. For Richard, who well remembered 'Father Vane's' behaviour to him of old—when he had been so good as to see him safely to the railway station—was inclined to be antagonistic in his manner towards the Priest, which, considering Richard was *pro tem.* his host, Mr. Greene resented as 'bad form.' Indeed, he went so far on the road of conciliation as to ask Mr. Vane to join a little dinner-party at his club on the ensuing day, which was foolish of him, since the proposed guest would hardly have mixed well with the rest of the company. Embarrassment on this score was, however, cut short by a *Deus intersit*—a theological circumstance.

'I am obliged to you,' said Mr. Vane gravely, 'but to-morrow is a Friday.'

'You have an engagement? I am sorry,' said Mr. Greene, without the faintest consciousness of a religious scruple.

‘And I am sorry, too, my young friend ; not only that I am obliged to decline your hospitality, but because you should have fixed upon a Friday for such an entertainment.’

‘I don’t believe in luck, myself,’ said Mr. Greene indifferently. Whereupon Mr. Richard Talbot began to laugh.

It is a well-known fact that people of wholly opposite views ‘get on’ together socially much better than those who merely differ from one another in details, but then it is important that folks should know what the views of others are. You may make a Parsee very angry by speaking disrespectfully of the sun in London ; and the Rev. Gerald Vane’s opinions were as absolutely unknown—and, indeed, unintelligible—to Mr. Leonard Greene as those of a Parsee. Mr. Greene’s people had for generations been ‘connected with commerce,’ and had not much concerned themselves with anything else ; while what religious principles had been inculcated in him had not been derived from the Church

of England. At Eton, indeed, he had noticed that some account was made of Fridays and saints' days, but as holy days he had always spelt them with an *i*, and had considered their very observance a local (though highly laudable) custom. He had never conceived to himself an individual who had religious objections to dine out upon a Friday; and for once his friend Richard was in a position of superior knowledge. He felt that explanation was impossible within the time that could be given to it (for Duncombe had already come in with the coffee), but he did contrive to stammer out an apology.

'It is not to *me*, Mr. Greene, that you should express contrition,' was Mr. Vane's cold reply, as he rose from table, whereat Richard laughed again, in a manner which afterwards drew forth from his young friend the remark that he did not know—concerning Mr. Richard Talbot and Mr. Gerald Vane—which had shown himself the bigger fool of the two.

This circumstance naturally strengthened

Mr. Vane's prejudice against Richard, whose friends, it seemed, were actually unacquainted with the first principles of the Christian religion; and he more than ever grieved that the estate of Talbot Tower, instead of reverting to so unworthy a recipient, had not passed—as he understood that at one time there had been hopes of its passing—into the pure hands of one who loved the Church. Lady Earnshaw, had she been conscious of this aspiration, would have said, 'You mean the Church's ministers,' but therein she would have wronged the priest. Narrow and harsh as his 'views' made him, he was no self-seeker; on the contrary, he lived a life of self-sacrifice, and did more good work every twelve hours than some persons of more elastic faith are wont to compass in a twelvemonth.

The little dinner in Gresham Street could not however be considered a success. Even Mr. Greene acknowledged that he had 'put his foot in it,' and always afterwards spoke of Mr. Vane as his 'ghostly enemy.'

Richard on his side, in addition to his dislike of the curate, was very far from being at ease. He could not speak to his aunt Edith of the matter which still lay next his heart, and in which she had taken such a prominent part. Her gentle voice was more sweet and low than ever when she addressed him that evening, and the clasp of her hand had a more tender significance for him than of old. His meeting with her turned his thoughts back, for the time, into the old channel, and made him sad.

‘Did Aunt Edith speak to you,’ he inquired of his friend, as they drove home, ‘of—of—Lucy?’

‘Well, yes,’ returned that astute young gentleman, ‘she said something very civil, though quite unnecessary, about my having gone to the Tower when you were in trouble.’

‘She didn’t say whether she was still living at the old place?’

‘Not a syllable.’

‘Then, after a long silence, Richard

asked whether his friend would mind calling in Ford's Alley—'Not that I want to see her again, you know, but just to hear how she is.'

Greene shrugged his shoulders to express disapproval of this course, but answered, 'I will go, of course.'

And the next day he went accordingly. On his return, he found Richard looking rather pale and anxious.

'Well, Greene, tell me, whom' (he said 'who') 'did you see?'

'I saw the most wonderful person; an old lady charmingly wrinkled, with a beard in the wrong place—over her eyes—for one thing.'

'That is her aunt Susan.'

'Indeed; well, she didn't treat me like one of the family by any means. She thought me no better than I should be, evidently; and, indeed, since I was not to mention your name, I did feel I had very little right to ask questions.'

'But you did ask after—after—Lucy?'

'I asked after Miss Lindon, and I was

told she no longer lived there. I then inquired where she did live, and was informed—that it was no business of mine. I was told indeed she was well, but in the same tone in which we used to reply to kind inquiries at Eton; the lady's manner had a none-the-better-for-seeing-you sort of air with it.'

'Then you have found out nothing?'

'Nothing, my dear Dick, except that the conclusion at which you have so wisely arrived is completely coincided in and approved of by the young lady's relatives.'

'You are telling me the truth?' said Richard suspiciously. 'You are not deceiving me? You really do not know where Lucy is?'

'Upon my honour I do not.' Mr. Greene spoke truth, though not the whole truth; not only had Susan Parkes declined to give him the slightest information as to the girl's present residence, but (which he omitted to add) he had looked over the theatrical announcements in the news-

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papers, and even the advertisements in the *Era*, in vain; the dramatic firmament showed no star that either beamed or twinkled under the name of Lucy Lindon.



CHAPTER III.

NOT YET.

FROM the day of his friend's visit to Ford's Alley we may date Richard's complete emancipation from what was called by his friends 'his unfortunate entanglement.' He never spoke, and very seldom even thought of Lucy again. But it must be confessed that his freedom—like that of most persons who have once been slaves—partook somewhat of the character of license. His tastes for extravagance increased, and very little of his money was spent in the advancement of missionary enterprise, or to any other good purpose. His nature was too genuine to admit of his sinking into the slough of swelldom ; he never pretended to be indifferent to all matters human and

divine—though it must be confessed he concerned himself with the former rather to the exclusion of the latter. He was not vicious in cold blood. He did not disbelieve in the existence of good men and women because his own mode of life did not bring him into contact with them. But he walked ‘in the ways of his own heart, and the sight of his own eyes;’ and they were evil. The years were not many since he had rowed Lucy across the Durn to see the Pharos light lit, but the difference between what he had been and what he had become—between man and boy—was measureless. His love for the girl now appeared a mere episode in his life, and so far back (or so it seemed) as to have belonged almost to another state of existence. If our bones and flesh, and thews and sinews, change, as we are told is the case, every seven years, our thoughts and feelings and instincts often do the like, and even within a shorter space. And they had not changed in Richard Talbot’s case for the better.

Durnton had ceased to pain him from its associations, and even the gloom of the Tower was not so oppressive as heretofore: his nature had become less sympathetic. He was sorry the poor governor moped so, and entertained some apprehension that he showed symptoms of breaking up; but his father's sombre and melancholy ways, and even his behaviour towards himself, which was cold and reticent as ever, though as usual relieved by touches of tenderness, no longer distressed him. He only felt exceedingly bored at Durnton, and preferred to spend his vacations anywhere save at home.

Thus matters went on till Richard's University course was almost over—the fruits of which it could scarcely be said were satisfactory. His friendship with Leonard Greene still continued, and was an influence for good; but they were less and less together even now, and it might well have been predicted that, when their college days were over, the roads of these two young men in life would have diverged, and that

they would have bidden light farewell to one another.

Greene was tending more and more towards theatrical pursuits. He had at last contrived to get a little comedy of his own, 'The Suitors,' played by the dramatic club—and it had been a great success—at the University. As the author of 'The Suitors' he felt an inch or two higher, and flattered himself, if he could only gain for it the attention of the London public, that he should add several inches to his stature. Richard wished him every success, but on his second attendance at the representation of his friend's piece he yawned. It was a slight matter—a mere sound—but the author saw it, and was affronted. A coolness had sprung up between the two friends, which was dissipated, however (as such things will be), by a real trouble befalling one of them.

Richard was playing pool one night, as usual, in the public room he frequented, and a point or two above his ordinary game. He had won one pool, and was on

the point of dividing another, when some one, in spite of the solemn warning painted on its glass panel, 'Wait for the stroke,' threw open the door in haste, and caused him to miss his ball. 'By jingo!' exclaimed Richard angrily—as a matter of fact, he used the very same word that George Parkes had done when he kicked his oar and life away together—and then his eye met Leonard Greene's. The room was in an uproar at once: the backers of the late 'striker' indignant at the inopportune intrusion, and those who had bet against him admitting it was 'deuced hard' as they pocketed their gains; but the chief sufferer put on his coat and followed his friend out of the place without a word.

'What is it, Leonard?' He used the Christian name because of their late little estrangement.

'I have bad news for you, Dick; your father is very ill.'

'Not dead?' pleaded Richard, turning very pale. His heart in a moment was sluiced with a torrent of remorseful thoughts

of him who had never said him nay to any wish save one, and who would have been called by many sons the best of fathers. He felt, for the first time, how he had taken all his father's generosity as a matter of course, and how little, how very little, of his time or thoughts he had given to him in return for it.

‘No, Dick, not dead, but very ill. He has had some sort of a stroke, as I gather.’

‘My God!’ cried Richard, looking at his cue, which he had forgotten to put away, with agonised self-reproach, ‘to think that I should have been playing this wretched game!’ He meant to imply, ‘While my poor father was on his death-bed.’

‘Don’t fret, Dick. How should you have known?’

‘How did *you* know?’ inquired Richard, almost fiercely, ‘when I, his son——’

‘That’s easily explained,’ put in the other. ‘Mr. Freeman telegraphed to me as well as to you, in case you should not happen to be in your rooms, and feeling, of course, that I should know where to find

you.' And he put into his hand that envelope of yellow with which we have all now become so well acquainted, and the colour of which would almost seem to have been borrowed from the Chinese, who use it as a sign of mourning, so doleful is the news it often conveys.

The telegram was from the Rector.

'Mr. Talbot has been taken suddenly and dangerously ill. Richard, to whom I have also telegraphed, must come at once. Carriage will be at station to meet every train.'

The words, as Greene perceived, seemed to stupefy Talbot rather than to spur him to exertion.

'Now, pull yourself together, Dick,' said he decisively; 'you have exactly twenty-five minutes in which to catch the mail. Your gyp is packing your portmanteau, and a trap is waiting at the college gates.'

'Oh, Greene, how kind and thoughtful you are. And I, God help me, never think

of anything!' Then, with a sudden impulse, 'Don't fancy I didn't like your play, old fellow, because I yawned.'

'Tut, tut! The play be damned—as it most likely will be. Look here, if I can be of any service at the Tower, send for me, by wire, and I will be with you in three hours: give me a line at all events to say how matters are. Here's the trap and your portmanteau.'

'Good-bye, Leonard.'

'Not yet; I shall see you to the station.' And off they rattled in the jingling fly together.

Richard was silent, full of sombre thoughts, but presently he felt the other's hand upon his knee.

'Dick, old fellow, you will forgive me for offering a piece of advice on such a subject, but if your poor governor should ask you to promise anything, at such a time you must do it, mind.'

'Of course I will, Pussy.' It was curious, but not without a touch of pathos, that he should have thus recurred to the old

school name of his companion. There was nothing in it, as both felt, of offence now, and somehow it seemed to suggest the long years of friendship between them better than any other.

'I don't know that he has anything to say to you in particular, but I used sometimes to think, Dick, when I was at Durnton, that your father had some trouble on his mind. It is your bounden duty, if it be so, Dick, to lighten it all you can.'

'Indeed I will,' said Richard earnestly. They parted on the platform, with a 'Thanks, thanks, old fellow,' upon one side, and a 'God bless you, Dick,' upon the other; and each well-worn phrase for once was genuine and full of meaning.

Richard Talbot would have had enough to think about, and of a very serious sort, as he was whirled through the summer night alone in the railway carriage, even had his friend not hinted of something which his father might have to communicate to him in what would in all probability be his last hours. There had been a time

when Richard had also suspected something of the sort, but then the mystery had been revealed to him, as he believed, in the story which linked him with Charles de Blaise. His father's gloom, seclusion, and even his partial estrangement from himself, the young man had set down as the effects of religious melancholy—for which, it must be confessed, he entertained feelings more akin to contempt than pity. Upon the whole, after much reflection, he came to the conclusion that these symptoms, none of which of course had escaped Greene's acute observation, had misled his friend, as they well might. If anything should be demanded of him, he was, on the other hand, prepared to do it: he felt, indeed, that all he could now do in deference to his father's wishes must fall far short of what he owed him, and would still leave years of omission to be repented of, but, alas! not to be redeemed.

Richard had arrived again at one of those epochs when the realities of life demand an attention which men of his type never pay

to them, save under pressure of their importunity. There are times when even the idler and the trifler are made to stand face to face with life, and to acknowledge its seriousness, before that supreme hour when life itself is merged in a still greater mystery.

At the station, though it was a fine night, he found the closed carriage waiting for him, and even that circumstance oppressed him ; he had always used the dog-cart, and a dismal sense of unwished-for ownership and mastery took possession of him as he stepped into the more pretentious vehicle. In answer to his eager inquiry, the coachman said that master had been main bad, as bad as a man could be with life in him (the phrase was delivered with that unctuousness which even the most devoted of family retainers always exhibit in describing a domestic calamity), but that he was now, the doctors thought, slightly better. Mr. Lucker, the local medical man, had, it seemed, taken up his quarters at the Tower, and had that day

met Sir James Farquharson, from London, in consultation. Mr. Freeman, too, was hardly ever out of the house, and late as it was—it was past midnight—would be there on Richard's arrival. He found the Rector in fact, who had been listening for the carriage wheels, standing at the hall-door, with a face grave indeed, but less dejected than he had expected.

‘Is there still hope?’ asked the young man tremulously.

‘Thanks be to God, yes, my lad,’ answered the other. ‘But you must be prepared for a great change.’

‘Shall I see him now—to-night?’

‘Oh, yes; he pines for you as a sick man for the morning; but you must say but very little. And, Richard—he cannot speak to *you*. Nay, you must show no weakness.’ (The answering tears glistened in the honest Rector's eyes as he said this.) ‘He is not, Sir James enjoined upon us, to be unnecessarily excited. He was quite dumb for a few hours, but is slowly regaining speech. And you must

be careful to come to his left side—the other is paralysed.'

Half paralysed himself, Richard followed the Rector to his father's room—a vast apartment that Queen Elizabeth was said to have once occupied, and which might have held half her court as well; it was now lighted by a small fire (though it was summer time) and by one oil lamp, and even that was screened from the heavily hung and canopied bed, which to the young man's eyes looked like a catafalque. He approached it very softly, but the Rector heralded him in loud and distinct tones—
'Talbot, here is Richard come to see you.'

There was a slow movement among the bed-clothes, and the boy felt his father's hand—the left hand—clasping his arm and feebly drawing him towards him. He leant forward and kissed the fevered brow and cheek in silence.

'I thank God, I thank God!' murmured a hoarse, clogged voice quite strange to him.

'There, you see, you have done your father good already,' said the Rector cheer-

fully. 'He has not spoken like that since he was taken ill.'

Inarticulate as was the patient's utterance, it was scarcely more so than was Richard's rejoinder. His soul was shaken to its very depths.

The interview, if it could be called such, between father and son, was a very long one. Twice Mr. Lucker, who was in the room, though Richard had not at first perceived him, came forward, watch in hand, and in the most dulcet tones suggested that there had been enough of talk—albeit, except for that one exclamation of the sick man, it had been all on Richard's side—and each time the patient had given sign that his son's words and presence were too dear to him to be dispensed with. At last, however, Richard himself made an effort to get away.

'You are tired, dear father, and must get some sleep. I shall be with you again in a few hours.' Then leaning down, he whispered, 'Is there anything—anything—I can do for you? Is there anybody you would wish to see?'

The sick man was silent, but Richard fancied there was a wistful look in his eyes. 'At such a time as this, dear father, would you not like to see Aunt Edith?'

'No,' was the unexpected reply, followed by a painful pause, and then the struggling words, 'not yet.'



CHAPTER IV.

VACILLATION.

To the young and thoughtless, sickness in the house is a strange, almost a weird experience. It seems contrary to nature, and an infringement of her laws, that rooms should be hidden from the sun, and voices hushed, and that every one should wear a grave face and tread softly. The questions that one puts to the other, 'Has he slept well?' 'What does the doctor say this morning?' seem like extracts from a sensational drama rather than the conversation of ordinary life. The very air seems heavy with the presage of woe, and within doors cannot be breathed with freedom. We are speaking, of course, of the surroundings of sickness unto death, or which may be unto

death, as was the case with those of Francis Talbot. He was better, Mr. Lucker allowed—was slowly recovering speech, and even movement ; but these admissions were not made with the cheerfulness with which that gentleman would certainly have made them if he could.

Mr. Lucker was a smooth man every way, and was prone to prophesy smooth things ; he always wore a smile upon his mild Saxon face, but sometimes it was a pained smile—‘ I would give you hope if I could, my friend,’ it then seemed to say to his patients, ‘ but as a matter of fact there is no hope.’ His voice was so gentle that it seemed to have been made for a sick-room, and it was never necessary for him to use that sound of all others a sick man hates to hear—a whisper. It may be, therefore, concluded that Mr. Lucker was not the parish doctor. He had a large and lucrative county practice, and was always terrifying the county by gentle hints that he was about to retire from the practice of his profession. He had met the great

doctor from London in consultation on Mr. Talbot's case upon equal terms, and Sir James had acknowledged the equality. 'No course of treatment than that already pursued could have been more judicious,' had been his statement to Mr. Freeman; and in answer to pressing inquiry, had said for self and colleague, 'It would be idle to conceal that we think it a most serious case. Mr. Talbot may rally, but——' and he shook a head which had hinted death to kings and princes.

'You think, then, he may have another stroke, which would be fatal?'

'It would certainly be fatal,' said Sir James.

This verdict the Rector, as in duty bound, had communicated, with all tenderness, to Richard.

'It is what we must all come to, my dear lad; and when it is our turn, I pray Heaven that we may be found as well prepared to meet it as your dear father.'

'Do you think he knows?' asked Richard, in awestruck tones.

‘Yes, I do. This has been coming on for years, though he would never let me tell you. For anything that may have seemed to you amiss in him, Richard—I mean any lack in demonstrativeness of affection—there was a physical cause.’

Richard moved his hand impatiently.

‘He was always kinder to me than I deserved,’ he said; but his heart smote him because he had not always thought so, and had made no allowance for such shortcomings.

‘I am not sure, Mr. Freeman,’ he presently added, ‘that you are right about my father’s knowledge of his critical state.’

And then he told him of his mention of Aunt Edith the previous night, and how the sick man had first answered ‘No,’ and then ‘Not yet.’

The Rector was silent, the fact being that he had already turned over this particular matter in his own mind. He had felt a moral responsibility regarding Edith, which had, however, been in part removed by his wife’s arguments.

‘You will do more harm than good,’ she said, ‘by mentioning his sister to the Squire. Even if he wishes to see her, their meeting will be prejudicial to him.’

And the Rector had answered dubiously, ‘Perhaps.’

‘I have made up my mind what to do,’ said Richard decisively. ‘I shall telegraph at once to Gresham Street, and explain how matters stand.’

‘Then your aunt will be here to-night.’

‘I know it; but my father need not be told. Only if he wishes to see her, when—I mean at any time—she will be on the spot.’

‘You will act as you please, Richard,’ answered the Rector, with feigned indifference, for at the same time he was saying to himself, ‘This lad with all his failings has a good heart.’

Mr. Talbot was decidedly better. There were indications of reviving sensibility in his numbed and rigid limbs, and his speech was less thick and slow. He did not, however, speak much, but lay, with his

hand in that of his son, waiting, as it seemed to Richard, for more strength. That wistful look had again come into his eyes, which had already attracted the young man's attention, and with every hour it grew more importunate. Presently, late in the afternoon, when Richard had returned to him after half an hour's absence, he began to speak with tolerable distinctness, though at first in jerks and snatches very distressing to the ear on which they fell.

'I want to be alone with you, Richard.' There was no one in the room but quiet Mr. Lucker, and he was sitting with a book in his hand in a bay-window far away out of sight and hearing. Nevertheless, Richard crossed over to the doctor, and told him what his father had said.

Mr. Lucker looked up with mild surprise, but closed his book, and, with one glance at his patient, left the room as noiselessly as a shadow.

'That is a clever fellow,' said the Squire musingly; 'but he will never set me on my legs again.' Then, 'Are they all

gone, Richard ; are we quite alone ?' he asked.

'We are quite alone, father.'

'Then lock the door.'

Richard's heart beat as he did so. He felt that something of importance—what even a dying man thinks to be of importance—was about to be revealed to him. Perhaps Leonard Greene was right ; and his father was going to require him to give some promise respecting his future conduct, but if so, there seemed no need for such extraordinary precautions.

'Richard—child of my heart—listen to me. I lie here a sinful man, but one who has confessed as much for many a year, and who hopes for salvation, But there is one thing—it may be a sin or not—which I have committed, and never confessed to any mortal ear—a secret that would have died with me but for your importunity.'

Richard made a gesture of astonishment.

'Yes, boy ; you have asked to hear it many times ; whenever, indeed, of late you

have mentioned your Aunt Edith's name. The knowledge of it may be your worldly ruin, but I must needs tell it now, while there is yet time. If she were but here——'

'Father, she *is* here—under this very roof.'

'What! Edith at the Tower!'

'Yes, sir; I ventured to send to her this morning. I wrote, "My father is very ill. He may not wish to see you, and if so, you must make no attempt to intrude upon him. But if you care to come upon the chance——"'

'And she did come?'

'Upon the instant, father, as I knew she would.'

'Miserable boy, what have you done!'

The sick man groaned and closed his eyes; but presently his lips began to murmur solemn words, as though appealing to God's guidance.

Alarmed at the effect his conduct had produced, Richard began to make excuse for it. 'I did what I thought right, father,

in sending for Aunt Edith. You need not see her, if it distresses you to do so; nor need she know that you are aware of her presence here.'

'You are not to blame, boy; it is the finger of God,' answered the sick man calmly. 'Since it seems good to Him that you should not succeed to the inheritance of your father, so be it.'

Richard stared, as well he might. He thought that his father's mind was wandering.

'Yes,' continued the Squire, in slow mechanical tones, 'I will drain this cup of bitterness to the dregs. Since she is here she shall learn all from my own lips, and in the presence of my own child. Perchance that may move her. Call her in and let her sit yonder'—pointing to a chair remote from the bed—'and keep you close to me, Richard.'

'But, father dear, do you feel strong enough?'

'Yes,' interrupted the sick man impatiently, 'go fetch her;' then added

wearily to himself, 'Let me tell the truth and die.'

His dull ear did not catch the opening and closing of the door, and a quick shudder of surprise came over him when he heard Richard say, 'She is here, father.'

'I don't see her,' answered the Squire, with his eyes fixed on the vacant chair.

'She is on her knees by your bedside.'

Then he became aware of a dim figure clothed in grey, with palms clasped together and a beseeching face, and he drew his wasted hand away, as if to avoid her touch.

'Brother, do not shrink from me,' pleaded Edith's gentle voice.

'You will shrink from *me*, when you have heard all,' answered the Squire, in hollow tones. 'Listen.'



CHAPTER V.

CONFESSION.

‘THERE was a time, Edith,’ began the sick man slowly, ‘when you and I were friends ; but it is so far back that I can scarce recall it. So soon as you began to think for yourself, you drew apart from me.’

She shook her head, and a faint smile passed over her features, but he took no notice of it.

‘You were not to blame—though it seemed hard to me—for I was wild and reckless ; and it might have seemed right to you to mark your disapproval of my conduct. But you were somewhat young—being fourteen or fifteen—for the *rôle* of mentor.’

'If I ever seemed to play that part, Francis,' interrupted Edith softly, 'I ask your pardon. It was most presumptuous and unfitting.'

'That in any case,' answered the other coldly; 'but, as I believe, you had your solid reasons for it: you had formed a deliberate plan to supplant me in the affections of my father.'

'Francis!' Only his name, but with as much tender reproach in the way of speaking it as a volume could convey.

'Yes, at that time, to supplant me in his affections,' continued the Squire, in tones which, although harsh, he strove in vain to render distinct and incisive. 'It was not till afterwards, when you had embraced a false faith, and listened to the specious arguments of its ministers, that you turned your attention to more material matters, and strove to oust me as my father's heir.'

'Never, never!' cried Edith earnestly.

'What! do you dare to tell me that no priest bade you plot and plan against me?'

‘I did not say that, Francis. I said I had never done it.’

‘Quibbler! You should have been a priest yourself. You that are vowed to Heaven, and wear that unseemly garb in token of it, how can you lie so?’

‘As to my attire, brother,’ answered Edith gently, ‘that, as Richard knows, is my usual dress. I wished to appear here otherwise—and since it vexes you, I would I had; but I am not mistress of myself in such matters.’

‘Hark, how she owns she is priest-rid!’ muttered the Squire scornfully.

‘Still I did not plot,’ pleaded Edith firmly.

‘Not on your own account, perhaps. You were a tool, a mouth-piece; but they plotted through you. First, when I was but a castaway; and afterwards, with ten-fold virulence, when I abjured a life of sin, and came to the knowledge of the Truth. Then you, or those who moulded you to their will, endeavoured to persuade my father that my new resolutions for good were false

and hypocritical; that I did but affect penitence to win his favour; and that he would be setting a bad example to fathers if he permitted me to remain his heir; while you, forsooth, the angel of the house, who ministered to his wants so diligently, only received a daughter's share of his estate. They never told him how they hated the Truth to which I had been called, and were resolved, if possible, to turn his wealth, through you, into channels of their own. Hoodwinked by them, yet conscious of the wrong you were doing to me and mine, you, on your part, strove to cozen the old man out of his lands and gold.'

The Squire paused, exhausted; and although for the first time Edith's pale face was touched with fire at his cruel words, her voice had more of pity in it than of scorn, as she replied:

'Francis, you do me wrong. I never strove, so help me Heaven! to win your inheritance away from you; and as for that of your boy, let him speak for himself and tell you if he thinks I could rob him.'

‘Indeed, father, I do not,’ said Richard simply. ‘Aunt Edith, next to yourself, has been the kindest friend I ever had.’

‘And yet she would have beggared you. I hold the proof of it—the written proof.’

‘If so,’ said Edith calmly, ‘it is a forgery.’

‘You hear her, Richard?’ answered the sick man. ‘She says a forgery. But presently she will change her note: these convent birds are taught to sing to any tune. When my father died, his will was a matter of surprise to those who knew how a certain person had striven to warp the old man’s mind. It was even conjectured that there must be a later will annulling it, for which search was made, no doubt.’

‘No search was made to my knowledge,’ said Edith quietly. ‘Our father’s will was found in his desk, where it was known to lie. Its provisions were, in my judgment, just ones, and in accordance with my own expectations.’

‘You *had* expectations, then?’ observed the Squire sardonically. ‘You were not so

wholly taken up with pious offices as to be oblivious to possibilities.'

'The subject was much discussed by others,' answered Edith calmly, 'and I could not shut my ears to them.'

'Just so; the Jesuits were all agape for Talbot Tower, I know. They deemed it would drop like a ripe fruit into their ravening maw; but it did not—just then. I came home with my child to the old house, and have lived there ever since, its acknowledged master. But when Richard here was six years old, a certain circumstance happened which will have an interest for you, *Sister* Edith.'

With use, the Squire had recovered the full mastery of his powers of speech; and the scornful stress he laid on the word 'sister' was equal to a folio of abhorrence. It was not his words which were exhausting his feeble frame, but the bitterness of the thoughts that prompted them

'Did you send for me, Francis, to your sick bed that you might speak your worst

of me before your son ?' inquired Edith reproachfully.

'No ; I sent for you to tell you of something to your advantage, which you, and they whom you call yours, will reap at my son's expense,' was the cold reply. 'Do you remember, Richard, the first time, and the last, when you and I fell out, fourteen years ago and more, in this very room, about a drum ?'

'Now you speak of it, I do, father ; though I had forgotten it.'

'Ah, *I* have not forgotten. You came in, as usual, while I was getting up, beating your drum. The harsh, rude noise was music to me, because you made it ; yet I took it away from you that morning, boy, and you never saw it more.'

'I remember now, father ; and how bitterly I cried about it,' said Richard.

'Yes ; but your bitterness passed away, and mine abode with me. You altered not, and yet you were never the same boy to me again. My pride and joy had become an instrument of torture to me. Whenever

I looked upon you henceforth, I said to myself, "He has opened my eyes to what I would not have seen." I loved you all the same, but your presence was distasteful to me.'

'I have noticed that,' said Richard, with simplicity.

'I feared so. Moreover, as you grew up, you often unconsciously gave me pain. Not once, nor twice, but many times, you have put in a word for your aunt here, as though I had not my own good reasons for knowing friends from enemies. Once you said there was never a doubt of what was the right thing to do, if one gave one's mind to fair play. That barb went to my heart, and rankled there. Now you must know why, though the knowledge will cost you dear. In my dressing-case you will find the key of yonder cabinet. Open it.'

Richard did so. It was a chest of Indian manufacture, full of small drawers mounted on one large one; and a faint odour of sandal-wood filled the room as the doors swung back.

‘You look very weary, Francis,’ said Edith gently; ‘you are overtasking your strength.’

‘The large drawer,’ murmured the Squire impatiently. ‘Take out what it contains.’

It was a child’s drum.

Richard and Edith interchanged glances of dismay; the thought occurred to each that the Squire was wandering in his wits.

‘You had broken that drum,’ the sick man continued, ‘and on the morning of which I speak you came to tell me that the butler had repaired it with a piece of parchment found on a shelf in the muniment-room. Read what is written on it aloud.’

‘It is difficult,’ said Richard; ‘I do not understand the handwriting, and the damp has injured it; but it seems to be the fragment of a will.’

‘It is your grandfather’s will, made subsequent to that which made me master here; and it is signed by his old game-keeper Sutton and Mr. Jordan, at that time Rector of Durnton. If you cannot read it, your aunt can, for she probably dictated the

terms of it herself. "Whereas I have cause to be dissatisfied with my son Francis, I hereby revoke all previous wills and testaments, and leave to my beloved daughter Edith," etc., etc. Who does not recognise the Roman hand ?

'Let me see it !' exclaimed Edith, rising to her feet.

'How she pricks her ears as the cornbin opens !' murmured the sick man scornfully. 'Yes, all is right, madam ; and our father, as you will doubtless say, only did what he would with his own. The will is good, and you may prosecute my corpse to-morrow for having fraudulently concealed it. The law may look upon it in that light for what I know. I do not seek to justify myself either to it or you. I did what I thought right to save the broad lands of Durnton from falling into the hands of scheming priests, and aiding a false faith to gain more proselytes. You think, of course, I did it for Richard's sake, or for my own. Think what you will ; God is *my* judge.'

'And mine, Francis,' answered Edith

solemnly. 'Your confidence comes late, but yet I thank you for it ; if you thought that I should take the Tower from your boy or you, this avowal, though tardy, is well made.'

'It is not the Tower only, I tell you,' answered the Squire passionately ; 'you have all—*all*.'

'What matters if it were all England !' answered Edith. 'If you had but said to yourself, "She will give it back ; she will never rob the boy whom she pretends to love, of his inheritance ;" if you had but credited me—oh, Francis—your own sister—with one generous feeling !'

'Mark how she will swallow it all, notwithstanding that sweet oil,' muttered the Squire contemptuously. 'After slaver, with the serpent, comes deglutition.'

Suddenly there was a crackling noise, and a bright jet leapt up from the low fire. Edith had thrown the drum upon it.

'What *have* you done ?' cried Richard tremulously, as he ran forward to snatch it from the flames.

‘Done? I have done what I would with my own,’ was her calm reply. ‘You may get it mended, Richard, for your first boy as you did in your own case.’ The drum itself he had rescued, but its parchment ends were burnt away. It might be of use, as his aunt had said, as a toy again: but not a vestige of old Reginald Talbot’s will remained to it.

‘Father, she has burnt the will,’ said Richard softly. ‘Did not I tell you how noble and generous she was. Without a moment’s hesitation, or thought of self——’

‘You are wrong there,’ interrupted Edith quickly, with her hand pressed to her heart; ‘but, thank Heaven, I have surmounted it. You are very welcome, Dick——Francis,’ she moved to the bed-foot; the sick man did not close his eyes as before, when her gaze rested on him, but regarded her with a wondering look, which softened more and more, till presently the tears stole down his haggard face.

‘I have been too bitter against you, Edith,’ he murmured. ‘Your kindness

has robbed me of my strength, or I would ask your pardon ; let Richard here be my intercessor.'

'You need none, brother, save Him whom we all need. I too, perhaps, have been bitter against you, or seemed to be so.'

Richard took her hand, and led her gently to his father's side. 'We have not kissed one another, Francis, for twenty years,' she said, as she bent down over the sick man. 'Let us never, never quarrel again.'

'That I may safely promise, Edith,' answered the Squire, with a faint smile. It was easy to see what he meant. The excitement which had hitherto sustained him had passed away, and left him feeble indeed ; his wrath had, in fact, been his strength, and now that its fire was quenched the light of life itself began to glimmer low. The hand which Edith held was thinner even than her own, and had no power to return her gentle clasp. Still the ruling thought of his later days was uppermost. 'You will not take advantage, Edith,' he

whispered in her ear, 'of the debt my Richard owes you to—to—to lead him from his father's faith?'

'He shall never be reminded that he owes me anything, Francis.'

'That is not what I asked,' returned the other; his failing eyes lit up with a gleam of suspicion. 'You have not promised.'

'I do promise,' sighed Edith. There was a long silence, during which the tick of the Louis Quatorze clock upon the mantel-piece smote painfully upon Richard's ear; it seemed to be measuring out his father's span of life. Presently Edith moved without a sound, and motioned to him to take her place by his father's pillow. A great change had come over the sick man's face; the shadow of death was on it. But his brain was still at work: presently he whispered hoarsely, 'He lies; he has got the card.' Edith cast at her nephew an agonised look; it was terrible to her that the thoughts of the dying man should stray into such channels. Richard, of course, knew that his father's

mind had recurred to the scene in Paris with De Blaise.

‘That was long ago, father,’ said he gently, ‘and you have made amends.’

The sick man opened his failing eyes, and fixed them on his son.

‘Kiss me, Dick,’ he murmured. They were the last words of Francis Talbot.



CHAPTER VI.

GOOD RESOLUTIONS.

WHEN a man dies, it is said, he is forgotten ; but this, in fact, does not take place (though I have known exceptions) till after he is buried. On the contrary, his death awakens memories of him that have slumbered in many breasts for years. There were scores of men whose recollections were thus aroused by the announcement of the demise of Francis Talbot. They had known him as a man about town ; a ' man of honour ' (so called) and fashion ; and then he had suddenly disappeared from their sight and knowledge. It was generally understood that he had ' taken to religion '—just as one should say, ' He went mad, poor fel-

low,'—but there were stout old stagers who still believed that 'some woman was at the bottom of it,' which was their key for every mystery.

These personages wagged their heads and tongues together over the 'melancholy event,' by no means in a melancholy manner, but rather as the Irish wake their corpses. The 'religious world' had also a good deal to say about their convert, 'whose latter days had redeemed the errors of his youth.' His story was commented upon from many a pulpit, though not from that of Durnton Regis; the dead man was too near and dear to the Rector to be made the subject of psychological analysis, though he spoke of his open hand and kindly heart, as he well might; for in the dead Squire, though Society might not miss him, the poor had lost a friend.

Old Walter Pole came to the funeral, notwithstanding that he had sworn never to set foot in 'that fellow Freeman's church,' from the day on which the Rector had declined a certain invitation to the

Manor, on the ground that he could not visit at the house 'where the card-table had its attractions.' His ample, handsome face looked very grave as it gazed on the coffin of his quondam friend.'

'A man had no right,' he was thinking, 'to die at that comparatively early age, and make his contemporaries, and much more his elders, feel uncomfortable.'

But after some soup and sherry he grew more cheerful, and offered in confidence to bet his grandson Henry a five-pound-note that the heir would marry that scoundrel Parkes' daughter within six months. 'He had never forgiven Richard for not running away with the girl in the usual way, in which case, as he asserted, he would have tired of her in a fortnight, and the whole affair have been settled for fifty pounds.'

The heads of families of half the county partook of the funeral meal at the Tower that day, which had not held such a concourse, as some observed, since the hounds used to meet there in old Reginald Talbot's time.

Leonard Greene, though funerals were hateful to him, had hastened to Durnton on the news of the Squire's death, and his presence was inexpressibly welcome to Richard. Kindness and sympathy alone had brought him, but the sight of Henry Pole struck a certain chord which had not been touched for years, and he took the first opportunity of asking after his sister, and then, in a casual way, after her friend, Miss Meredith.

'Oh, she is no longer Miss Meredith; she has married a missionary and gone out to the Pacific; I thought at one time you might have been Mr. Right yourself.'

'Oh, I was not centaur enough,' said Mr. Greene.

'Well, I do not know that that would have made much difference, for I hear that she has gone to live in an island where there are no horses.'

'That would be just the place for me,' answered the other with a smile, as if at his own incompetency in a saddle.

But the fact was that it was a very bitter

smile. Mr. Greene's hilarious exterior concealed a very tender and, indeed, a morbidly sensitive disposition. To the superficial observer he seemed like a vessel built of cork, that, so far as sinking was concerned, might defy the heaviest artillery of fate ; that, if it riddled him through and through, he would be little the worse for it, and would still have replied with his small arms and light carronades. But he was by no means so seaworthy as he looked. Moreover, the very weapons that he employed were, in the hands of others, fatal to himself. One does not become impervious to small shot because one is in the habit of sparrow-shooting. He had really been deeply smitten with Miss Meredith ; probably she had had nothing in common with him but kindliness of disposition, and they would soon have wearied of one another ; but he followed the good advice of the wittiest of divines in one respect, he 'took short views.' If only her guardian had not misunderstood his offer in so absurd a manner the two young people, so far as he

was concerned, might have been married—and been separated—by this time ; but the shaft of ridicule had entered into his soul. From that fatal hour he had never ventured to address the beloved object seriously while they were under the same roof ; to write to her he found still more difficult ; and even the inquiries he had made about her from time to time he had not had the courage to put to those likely to be the best informed, or in such a manner as to elicit the information he most desired. Maud Meredith had occupied a little chamber in his soul for years—for some time, it now seemed, even after she had become Maud something-else—and this sudden vacancy of the shrine was a considerable shock to him. He probably felt it quite as deeply as any proprietor of a little cottage in the country, very picturesque but difficult to let, who has lost his tenant. The blow, indeed, far from stunning him—which would have been an acknowledgment of his weakness, and was therefore not to be permitted for an instant—rather

stimulated his energies, and caused Mr. Lucker (who shared a mourning coach with him) to describe him as the most charming companion—for a funeral—that it had ever been his good fortune to meet.

And Mr. Greene returned the compliment by conferring on the gentle doctor the sobriquet of 'Lucca oil,' and expressing his opinion that so harmonious a practitioner must set his patient's bones to music. A manuscript poem is also extant of this date, and in Mr. G.'s handwriting, which describes a course of medical treatment in very attractive and mellifluous terms, and has for its refrain these (I venture to think) original lines.

'Tis ho for the merry merry merry blue pill,
And the black black draught in the morning.'

These flights of fun were merely indications that Mr. Greene's mind was disturbed, just as serious people under like conditions pitch into their poor relations, or passionate persons indulge in bad language. His behaviour under the solemn circumstances

was, it must be understood, perfectly decorous. But it requires a very dull man indeed to be consistently sombre throughout the funeral obsequies of any one (not personally dear to him) as they are performed in this enlightened land. The mutes, the plumes, the horses, the coaches, are no doubt designed—first, to swell the undertaker's bill; and secondly, to make the idea of Death as much like a nightmare as possible. But human nature resents the hideous oppression, and sometimes breaks out in what we may call 'the contrary direction.' In Scotland, as is well known, interments are the chief public amusements, and it is said of a young man that 'he goes about a good deal to funerals, just in the same sense that we deplore his frequenting music-halls and casinos.

It was impossible that a man like Francis Talbot, who had been a recluse for twenty years, and had rejected all overtures of friendship from his neighbours, should draw tears from them over his remains. The contents of his will, on the other hand,

commanded their gravest attention. Every one was surprised to find how comparatively poor he had died ; for, though allowed to have been of a generous disposition, it was thought that he must have saved money during his long seclusion. What there was, however, was left to 'my son, Richard, absolutely,' viz., the very considerable estate of Durnton Tower, and about fifteen thousand pounds ; the family lawyer and Mr. Freeman being appointed trustees for the lad—an office that was almost a sine-cure, since in a few months he would attain his majority.

'What on earth could Talbot have done with his money?' was the question that every one put to his neighbour when these facts were made known. 'Begad, he was not such a saint after all, perhaps,' whispered one to the Squire of Masham Manor ; 'he must have had some private expenses.'

'Not a bit of it,' answered old Pole ; 'he has been paying off his mortgages.' A way of frittering away ready money for which

the speaker's tone evinced his profound contempt.

His observation, however, was a shrewd one, and to some extent correct. When Francis Talbot succeeded to the family estate he had had to pay large sums, borrowed at ruinous interest, upon his expectations; he had now left it free and unencumbered to his son, with one proviso—not in the body of the will, but in a memorandum found within it for Richard's private eye—namely, that he should pay £400 a year to Charles de Blaise.

Whatever was the general opinion, the heir, when his grief permitted him to think of such matters (which was not until days afterwards) was more than satisfied with what had accrued to him. It seemed to him an ample fortune—and then but for his Aunt Edith's generous behaviour he would have been penniless! He would have acknowledged as much, again and again, to her, if she would have permitted him, but her grave, pained face forbade it. She smiled indeed, as she repeated her old

phrase, 'You are welcome, my dear boy,' but it was plain the subject was distressing to her. He thought this was on account of his father's behaviour in the matter, which was certainly open to the gravest censure; but that was not the case. Edith had not only frankly accepted her brother's excuse for his conduct, but fully believed in the motives he had attributed to it. She knew to what lengths religious fanaticism would carry even scrupulous men.

In her pocket was a letter from her spiritual adviser, the Rev. Gerald Vane (to whom she confessed everything, as in duty bound), censuring her in the strongest terms for having, 'in a moment of culpable weakness,' destroyed her father's will. She had not informed him (for she did 'stop somewhere,' even in obedience to the Church) of the fact of its having been so long designedly concealed from her; but had led him to conclude that the document had been quite recently discovered.

'You are flattered, no doubt,' he wrote, 'at having made a sacrifice to kinship; but

I must needs tell you it was not at your own expense, but at that of our Holy cause. You have placed the fortune that would have supported it, and been the means of saving souls, in the hands of one who will lose his own soul in lavishing the money on unworthy objects. If you felt your weakness (as you acknowledge) at the very time you made this false step, why did you not at least wait for my advice? Your punishment will be to see the fruits of this ill-judged generosity.' And indeed poor Sister Edith already saw in her mind's eye on the one hand certain excellent institutions for the advancement of true religion languishing for want of funds, and on the other, the career of a spendthrift.

Mr. Vane's letter contained exhortations as well as reproof, and even some practical suggestions. 'Could she not appeal,' it hinted, 'to a young man's sense of right, not as yet perhaps utterly obscured by evil courses, and get something back out of the fire?'

No, she could not. What she had

given, she had given. The Rev. Gerald Vane knew, as he fancied, his fair penitent thoroughly, but she was different from many of those he had shriven in a far higher rank of life, in being that rarity (rarer even than a true gentleman), a true gentlewoman. Her feelings of delicacy, generosity, and tenderness could resist even priestly authority in a case of this kind; and they did resist it. If Father Vane could have spoken to her in person, matters might, perhaps, have gone better for him; but a visit to the Tower at such a time would indeed have been inopportune. (It would also have been very dangerous, for Richard—especially if he had guessed his errand—would have pitched him into the moat, and the Rector would have held his head under.)

Not a word even did Edith say of the 'talent' thus entrusted to Richard—his newly-acquired fortune. If the voice of the dead failed just then to touch him, she rightly concluded that the voice of the living would have no weight. But, to do

him justice, Richard was for the moment—as Mr. Greene afterwards expressed it—‘a prey’ to good resolutions. If he could not adopt his father’s opinions, he would at least lead such a life as his father would have approved of; he would never forget how good he had been to him, nor the cross he had borne so many years for his sake. Such was the view he endeavoured to take of his father’s concealment of the will, though it really shocked his sense of right, and he would not have let others know of it for twice the fortune it had brought to him.

For the present he decided to go back to Cambridge—‘to take his degree,’ as was given out; but in truth he cared very little about his degree. His mind, unused to reflection, was in a state of chaos, and could only decide upon getting away from the Tower as soon as possible. He left it with his friend, a few hours after the departure of Aunt Edith.

‘Was I right about your poor father?’ asked Greene suddenly, as they sat in the

train together. 'I mean about his having something on his mind.'

'Yes, you were. He had no request, however, to make of me, as you imagine.'

Richard's face was scarlet as he said this, and Greene pushed his inquiries no further. In his secret heart he believed that, for the first time in his life, his friend had told him a lie.



CHAPTER VII.

MR. GREENE IS APPRECIATED AT LAST.

IN these grasping days it is the fashion to sneer at a modest competence, and especially to speak ill of it in the hands of youth. It is said to take away 'the incentive to exertion.' To prevent, that is, the necessity of its possessor throwing himself sword in hand upon that oyster, the world, along with the rest of his contemporaries, and scattering grit and slime in their frantic attempts to open it in all directions. Considering the dirt that he has but too often to eat before he gets at the oyster, I am not convinced of the wholesomeness of this discipline. On the other hand, if it is not an advantage to a young man to be poor,

riches are a greater snare on entering life than at any other period. About half of those who are thus situated go to the dogs in one way or another (generally on horse-back), and never come back again. Imagine what it must be for a youth of even very moderate powers of observation to see nineteen-twentieths of his seniors, including even his spiritual pastors and masters, toiling and moiling, and grasping and claspings, and sweating and fretting (just as the waters came down at Lodore), after that of which he already possesses an abundance without exertion. It must almost seem to him that he has attained all which makes life worth having. The consideration with which he is treated on account of his possession of the precious commodity—only second to that which is paid to one who has the unspeakable merit of having succeeded to a title—must be also what the Scotch call ‘upsetting.’ And, above all, the gates of pleasure are open to him in all directions at a time when he has strength and taste and appetite to enjoy it. It is my opinion that

a good young man with four thousand a year deserves to be canonised.

Mr. Richard Talbot, albeit there was already a saint in his family, showed no sign of earning this distinction. The impression produced by his father's death and burial, the generosity of his aunt, the kindly advice of Mrs. Freeman, and the vague voice of duty, soon passed away. He had been always 'fast,' but his pace became now greatly accelerated. He discovered for the first time that he had one special faculty, namely, for spending money. It ran out of his pockets as though they had holes in them; his fingers could no more retain it than if it had been water. The University, he soon found, did not afford sufficient scope for the indulgence of this passion, and he left it in a few months for London—and without a degree. He had plenty of money, he said, when remonstrated with by the Rector, to buy one in Germany, if it was so absolutely necessary; but for his part he felt he should be neither better nor worse for being a B.A. The

money it cost in fees might be expended much more advantageously in a dinner at Richmond.

This was sad ; but what the Rector felt more keenly was that the young man refused point-blank to come to the Tower to celebrate his majority. The tenantry were welcome to their entertainment, the poor to their doles—he quite enjoyed giving *carte blanche* for everything in that way ; but why should his presence be necessary to the roasting of the ox ?

‘He will one day come home like the prodigal,’ thought the Rector bitterly ; ‘only there will be no ox, nor even a fatted calf.’

He felt, and not unnaturally, that in this particular Richard should, even if his own sense of duty had failed to prompt him, have acceded to the wishes of his father’s friend. There was indeed that tie, as the young man acknowledged, but otherwise there was no sort of sympathy between Mr. Freeman and himself : he dissented from his views, he disliked his sermons, and

had no intention of following his advice. The only advice that Richard now did take was that of some very clever acquaintances of his, who had always the earliest intelligence (to believe their own account) concerning racing matters, and who were therefore in a position to put their friends up to all the 'good things;' for, being idle and wealthy, this young Englishman's mind turned as naturally to the Turf as the needle to the pole.

Unhappily, however, he was not so sharp as the needle, and on his very first Derby a great misfortune befell him. Imagine him very accurately dressed, on the box-seat of somebody's drag, going down the road to witness the Great National 'Event;' recall, if you can, reader, your own first experience of a Derby—the dust, the heat, the Babel of vile sounds, the champagne lunch devoured in inexpressible discomfort, the taking or the giving of the odds in your new betting-book—and spare me the narration of the details. Flushed with wine and excitement, Richard stuck to the horse that

had been pointed out to him as 'a moral' like a man—nay, like a centaur. He would hedge nothing, but 'put the pot on' as only a very young or a desperate man ever does put it. Unhappily (for otherwise the burnt child might in future have shunned the fire), he not only 'put it on,' but 'pulled it off;' he won a small fortune—a success which, it is needless to say, he attributed to his own sagacity. It is said that the devil helps beginners—a fact one had better not insist upon, lest it should cause a still greater number of young people to try their luck; but it is certain that when he does assist them in this manner, it is for his own ends. It is their first step to ruin.

Leonard Greene, who was now himself settled in town, in lodgings in the Adelphi, perceived, with regret, on every visit that he paid to the Club Chambers in Pall Mall, where Richard had established himself, that that young gentleman was growing more and more infatuated with the Turf mania. If he had been a commercial traveller, he could scarcely have attended more

assiduously to his new business, which was that of frequenting every race meeting of importance in the United Kingdom.

‘I have become quite a business man, old fellow,’ said Dick himself; ‘if you would but look at my book you would see that I leave nothing to chance—that can possibly be avoided.’

This latter phrase had reference to a bad debt or two, of which he had already had experience; but, as a matter of fact, the young fellow had become very business-like and methodical, so far as his accounts were concerned. He had bought a book with ‘winnings’ printed on one page, and ‘losings’ on the other; the item ‘won on Derby’ occupying a proud position on the former page, but unhappily all to itself. Some men, who are ruining themselves and know it, are still wont to keep an accurate account of their downward career, just as a poor shipwrecked wretch jots down in his diary all the sad records of his fate to the day he dies. Richard already prided himself in ‘making a book,’ not

indeed so as to be absolutely safe, but so as always to win a good stake—if he did win.

‘My poor Dick,’ said Greene, glancing somewhat contemptuously at his friend’s figures, ‘you remind me of a man among thieves, who, being aware of his position, is so prudent that he holds his hat on with both hands to preserve it—while they pick his pockets.’

But he might as well have preached to the winds. All that he could do for his friend was to lead him as much as possible into other channels of pleasure and excitement. Mr. Greene’s own hobby was not a very promising one; but it was at least cheaper to keep than Richard’s. It was the stage. He firmly believed himself to be a dramatic genius, and all his efforts were directed to spread this simple faith, especially among stage managers—an incredulous race, and the more difficult to convince of his capabilities, from the fact that they would not read his plays, though in some cases they had the courtesy to assert that they had done so.

He had a splendid tragedy in five acts, in manuscript, which was a source of much apprehension to Talbot. His friend had once tentatively observed, 'I will read it to you, some day, old fellow, if you will allow me.' And Richard was always afraid, when they were alone together, and more than usually confidential, that this frightful threat would be put into execution, whether he 'allowed' it or not. There are some things the strain of which no friendship, however firmly linked, can bear. If Orestes himself had said to Pylades, 'I have a drama here in manuscript,' and then proceeded to inflict it on him, their intimacy would never have become historical. The obligation (of listening to such a thing) is not insisted upon by even the most Christian writers. But short of this, Talbot would have done anything to oblige his friend; and he sympathised most loyally in the disappointments and defeats he suffered at the hands of his natural enemies—the managers.

One morning Greene called at his friend's

rooms earlier than usual. The latter had only just finished his breakfast, for it was scarcely noon ; he was lolling moodily in an arm-chair with an immense cigar in his mouth, and what he called his 'ledger' in his hand—a very diminutive sort of ledger, bound in morocco with silver clasps, and furnished with a metallic pencil.

'Well, Pussy, how goes it? you look blooming.'

'I wish I could return the compliment. What makes you seem so down upon your luck, old fellow?'

'Why, my luck having been down upon me. Do you remember what I told you the other day about the Brother to Boanerges?'

'I never heard of Boanerges himself,' returned Greene, with studied indifference.

'Tut, tut! I mean the favourite for "the Metropolitan." I told you of the tip I had direct from the stable—how he was a perfect certainty, and yet you could get any odds about him. In twenty-four hours they went down from 20 to 1 to 5. I could

have made a competence out of it if I pleased.'

'I see, however, that you didn't please.'

'Of course not; I went in for the big thing as any fellow would have done, and should have been a millionaire by this time but for my infernal luck. The horse could have won in a canter.'

'Then why didn't he?'

'Why, damn him, because he's dead.'

'That seems hard,' said Greene reflectively. 'I don't think even the theologians damn anybody for dying.'

'My dear fellow, it's no joking matter. I have lost ten thousand pounds by that beast.'

'Ten thousand pounds!'

'Yes; that is to say I ought to have won it, and I didn't; that is what I call losing it; and I *have* lost nearly three thousand pounds. You would be astonished if you knew what I had lost since May.'

'Nothing would astonish me in that way, Dick,' answered the other gravely. 'You

lost your wits, in my opinion, when you won your first stake at Epsom.'

'Aye, that was a good haul, wasn't it?' said Richard, brightening up a little. 'If we could only do that sort of thing every day; but somehow, since then, everything has gone quite contrary. Here's the end of the season, and hardly a chance left of recouping oneself.'

'That is fortunate at all events,' answered the other dryly. 'Not but that you have plenty of ways of ruining yourself, beside horse-racing, before the season begins again.'

'No doubt,' answered Dick, laughing, 'I could check five or six of them off at once on my fingers——'

'Check them, but not on your fingers,' interrupted Greene sardonically. 'I am sick and tired of telling you what a fool you are. However, I am come this morning to humour your taste for extravagance. You shall take some stalls at the theatre where my play is coming out.'

'Your play! Oh, Pussy, I'm so glad.

So you have got these stage villains to appreciate your talents at last. I will take twenty stalls. Is it that five act Thingamybob ?

‘No ; it is not the tragedy, if that is what you mean by the Thingamybob. It is that rather neat little comedy (if I may say so) that was acted at Cambridge. It is not coming out “neat,” of course—it will have to be mixed with something. My play—they call it a Farce, confound their impudence !—will be played first, and then this *pièce de résistance*—something no fellow can stand.’

‘And where is it to be ?’

‘At the Imperial.’

‘Oh, by jingo ! I most sincerely congratulate you, Pussy. You will be quite a great man.’

‘I shall be no greater for being at last appreciated,’ observed Mr. Greene (who, it may be perceived, if he had not the dramatic genius, had at least one of the weaknesses incident to its possessors) ; ‘but I confess that it gives me great pleasure to

feel that my play is going to have a chance, and that my friends—and especially you, Dick—will see “The Suitors” placed on the stage as it should be.’

‘That will be charming,’ answered Talbot, with a little embarrassment, arising from the recollection of how he had yawned over it at Cambridge and been found out by the author. ‘But when is it to be?’

‘Well, I am sorry to say not till late in the autumn. It is not the usual company at the Imperial who will play it. The theatre has been taken on “spec” by Madam Lucinda—a singing woman—and she will have rather a scratch lot. But it’s better than nothing, of course; and then, “the Imperial is the Imperial,” you know.’

‘True, even if there’s nobody in it,’ added Dick, unconscious of satire.

‘Just so,’ said Mr. Greene, without moving a muscle. ‘In August, there is nothing so pleasant as an empty house.’

However, I may rely upon your presence, old fellow.'

'I will come if I live,' said Dick, 'and I am not thinking of dying.'

Which, alas! was very true.



CHAPTER VIII.

RECOGNITION.

I ONCE knew a spendthrift who ran through three fortunes, and was afflicted with much melancholy upon his deathbed because he had just come into a fourth, which it was impossible, from the nature of the circumstances, that he *could* run through. He was exceptionally favoured by Fate in being able to the very last to enjoy the habit of extravagance which often palls on others even before the means of indulging it have failed them ; and of course he was still more fortunate in having the fortunes. Most spendthrifts have but one in a lifetime—and this last was the truth (since less material arguments were obviously useless)

that Mr. Leonard Greene endeavoured to impress upon his young friend.

Richard Talbot had as many excuses, and as fanciful ones, for spending money, as old Burton gives for indulging in melancholy. His property—for his income as we may well imagine had little to do with it—was small, as compared with that of many other spendthrifts, but yet he had contrived within a very few months to become notorious, even in London, and in this very common line of business. The racehorse is of course the swiftest animal for getting rid of a man's money; but there are many other methods of accomplishing this object at a quick rate. What Richard wanted, for example, in skill at the game of whist, he made up for in the amount of stake, and this was not objected to in certain scientific circles; then the theatre and its belongings cost him considerably more than his seat in the stalls, and the shilling fee to the attendant; and his hospitalities at Richmond or Greenwich were boundless. 'The world,' or what is called such, is not

so very large after all, and the heir of Talbot Tower had got to be tolerably well known in it—and even beyond it. Down at Durnton it was impossible that folks should be ignorant of his goings on, because the family lawyer had been already in communication with him in connection with the ‘realisation’ of a certain portion of the estate; and, somehow or other, tidings of his extravagance had even reached Gresham Street, whereat Lady Earnshaw murmured, ‘Poor boy’ (as over a child with necessary measles), and Edith shed bitter tears—not for the loss of the money which might have been hers, but for the way in which it was going.

For some weeks Mr. Greene had seen little or nothing of his friend, being absorbed in his dramatic enterprise. Having got his play read and accepted, for the Imperial—though, as I have said, it was to be played by an out-of-the-season company—he was not a man to let it fail through any neglect on his own part. He was not to get a penny for it—that was understood, to

begin with ; but he thought himself fortunate that he had not to pay his manageress for bringing it out, for he firmly believed that when it should once have been performed in public, his reputation as a playwright would be secured. He had been so deeply and so long wrapped up in the production of his little drama, that any one in connection with it ceased to have individuality for him, and only formed part of that divine work ; otherwise, there was at least one among the ' scratch ' company (as they were irreverently termed) who would have interested him not a little.

Madam Lucinda, the (interim) manager, would, had his eyes not been engaged on less agreeable objects, have struck him, as she did most people, as a remarkably fine woman. She was young, and tall, and graceful, with better manners than belong to managers ; and having once accepted his play, permitted him to have his own way with it, and, so far as lay in her power, with the players. She was far too great a personage in her own opinion to act in so

slight a thing herself, and reserved her powers for the *pièce de résistance*, as Mr. Greene had called it, which had plenty of singing in it. She gave him *carte blanche*, I say, as to his own play, but the *carte blanche* was of the nature of a blank check given by a very generous and impulsive fellow, but who has unhappily no balance at his bankers. She had little or no authority over her company, which was composed of certain free lances of the stage who had temporarily joined her banner without much hope of gain, and—being out of an engagement—chiefly to keep themselves before the public.

Each imagined that he or she would be the cause of the success of the speculation, if it should be a success; and if a failure, that it would be owing to the want of support from their fellows. In theatrical affairs a bundle of 'sticks' is *not* necessarily strong, and there were a great many such in Madam Lucinda's company; and to the worst of the sticks, as usual, was allotted the task of playing the first piece.

Poor Mr. Greene went almost out of his mind to see how they mauled 'The Suitors' in rehearsal, which at the University, so far as the male characters were concerned at least, had been very fairly rendered. The reason of this was that the comedy was what is called a 'genteel' one, and under the roof of the Imperial, as it was at present tenanted, there was no one capable of acting like a gentleman. The performers were also given to 'gag'—to interpolate sentiments, and, what was worse, *facetiae* of their own, or to substitute it for what the author would have put in their mouths. And this original matter of theirs was very sad stuff.

Ten times a day poor Mr. Greene made up his mind to 'withdraw' his play; but in the first place he didn't quite know how to do it, or even whether he *could* do it; and secondly, he had a faint hope that at the public representation of the piece things would go better. His actors, when imperfect in their parts, would tell him that, though they failed sometimes in rehearsal,

they always 'came out right' before the curtain; and he devoutly hoped that it might be so. But it was not their want of memory that he feared, so much as the powers of their imagination.

'Well, Mr. Greene, is there anything more you want for "The Suitors?"' inquired Madam Lucinda of him graciously, the day before the opening night.

'Not so much *more* as less, my dear madam,' was his reply. 'If the gentlemen would only behave as such——'

'You must not ask impossibilities,' she put in coldly.

'But is the proper use of the letter "h" an impossibility, madam?'

'It is very difficult with some people; indeed, I have found it so myself,' added the lady demurely.

'I never noticed it, madam,' answered the other, with no excess of gallantry; but then his mind was preoccupied. 'If these gentry would only drop their bad habits, and *not* their "h's," I should feel much happier with respect to "The Suitors."'

'It is a nice little play, Mr. Greene, and ought to "go," but I can do no more for it. I am afraid I cannot spare you a box.'

'Indeed! Not a box for my own play?'

'Well, you see, the *Chatterer* must have the stage-box; that it insists upon, or it will damn us all to a certainty. Then the *Scratcher* must have the next best box; and the *Teaser*, the *Biter*, and the *Squeezer* must all have boxes.'

'The Press seems to be a "little exacting,"' observed Mr. Greene. 'But where will you put the *Thunderer*?'

'Oh, the *Thunderer* is too grand to accept boxes. The *Thunderer* always buys a stall for itself, and pays for it in hard cash, which is fortunate, for *it* will damn us at all events; it always does damn a new play.'

'By jingo! this is pleasant,' observed Mr. Greene.

'It's nothing when you're used to it, sir.'

'You can't have been used to it long, madam,' said Greene, with a little bow.

It was his first gallant speech to his manageress, but he was touched by her

pluck and spirit, and for the first time took note of how very young, as well as beautiful, she was.

‘Not very long,’ answered she quietly ; ‘but one lives through a good deal in a short time behind the footlights. You can have a stall or two, of course.’

‘A friend of mine has taken twenty.’

‘That must be a friend indeed ; I hope he will find the people to fill them. This is a very bad time of year for getting an audience, or I should not be the manager of the Imperial.’

Mr. Greene admired the frankness of this woman, who, although an actress, ventured to be natural, and showed no symptom of the coquette.

‘I wish, Madam Lucinda, you were acting in my play ; that is,’ he added, ‘I wish that it was worthy of you.’

‘You are very good,’ said she coldly, ‘but it is not in my line. If there had been a singing chambermaid in the piece, then I might have thought about it.’

He did not quite know whether she was

in jest or earnest. She did not look at all like a singing chambermaid, but much more like a duchess—that is, a stage duchess, which is generally as greatly superior (in appearance) to the real article as the stage gentleman is inferior to his original.

The ladies in his play were pleasant enough, and infinitely superior to the males; but they were of a different genus from this woman: not in talent—for Madam Lucinda was by no means a Mrs. Siddons, and was said to owe more to her face and figure for such reputation as she had gained, than to her vocal or dramatic powers—but in character. He found himself for the first time interested in the pecuniary success of her venture, of which, to say truth, he did not entertain any high expectations. He had seen a rehearsal of the *pièce de résistance*, and, though it was better acted than his own play, he thought it dull. Its authorship was a secret, but there were uncharitable people who hinted that the author was a certain man of title, who paid for its production, for the hire of the theatre, and for

more besides. It was possibly true ; for the drama has at least as much cause as any other profession, not excepting even 'the Church,' to thank Heaven we have a 'House of Lords.'

But, however that was, Mr. Greene thought better of Madam Lucinda that day than he had ever expected to do, and would have thought more about her but for 'The Suitors,' the impending fate of which naturally claimed his attention. Greene and Talbot were both popular in their respective circles, and could certainly have counted upon any number of young men to witness the production of a new play ; only at this time of the year there were no young men, except at Messrs. Lewis and Allenby's or Messrs. Marshall and Snelgrove's, in town, and these they were not acquainted with.

'There are lots of people of a certain sort,' Madam Lucinda had said, with her usual frankness, 'who will lend a hand to me and my piece, but that will be only for the first night or two ; one cannot look for full houses at this season.'

But this had not prepared Mr. Greene for the beggarly account of empty stalls that met his gaze when his friend and he took their places on the eventful night. Talbot had sent out his nineteen tickets to the quarters he had thought most favourable to their acceptance, but only one friend had been able to make use of them ; the rest were all gone to the moors, as he would have himself gone but for this supreme occasion, or to the sea, and so there were eighteen vacant places all of a row. The exception was that in which Sir Stafford Rue sat, an ancient pillar of the Turf, and faithful votary of Pall Mall, who, when asked on one occasion whether he had *ever* been into the country, was understood to have replied, 'Sir, I once went to Brighton, and repented of it.'

The other stalls, indeed, had all been taken, but by friends of the manageress, who did not see the necessity of being in time for the farce, and, indeed, thought it looked better to show Madam Lucinda that they only came to see *her* ; so these

were empty too. And the boxes, of course, were empty, partly because a piece that 'played the people in' was not worthy of the notice of the great dramatic critics, and partly because they wished to give an impression of the fashionable hour at which they dined, and the aristocratic society which they frequented.

The pit and galleries and dress circle were full enough (for you can fill anything with 'paper'), but the space between the two friends, who were in a back row, and the stage, occupied only by the presence of the bald old baronet (who had brought a French novel with him to relieve *ennui*, and was reading it), was like a desert in which stands one leafless palm, and depressed poor Mr. Greene exceedingly.

'By jingo!' said he ruefully, 'the curtain is going up, and there's nobody here.'

'The gallery is full,' answered Dick encouragingly; and, indeed, the vigour with which the 'gods' were demanding that the play should begin, by shrieks and stamps, was suggestive of many thousands.

‘Confound the gallery!’ muttered Greene; and then he felt his friend beginning to shake, and tried to think how enjoyable the humour of the situation would have been if anybody else had been the dramatist of the evening.

Presently some ladies came into the stage-box, which made the other boxes look emptier than ever.

‘Are those friends of yours, Pussy?’ inquired Dick slyly.

‘I don’t know yet,’ was the unexpected reply. ‘They are the critics attached to the staff of the *Spatterer*.’

‘Dear me!’ said Dick, examining them through his glasses. ‘Um—ah!’

And Greene felt him beginning to shake again.

The curtain rose, and the characters entered to plaudits. They were not numerous, but they were equal in numbers to the occupants of the stage-box, *plus* the baronet, who had closed his French novel, but kept his finger between the leaves, that solace under boredom might be found immedi-

ately. It was undoubtedly very depressing. 'I wish the house would take fire,' murmured Mr. Greene, 'and the play, and the players, and these few people (who would never be missed), be all burnt together.'

'What are the pit laughing at? I did not catch it,' inquired Dick presently.

'Of course you didn't. It was those beasts coming into their stalls. They are spoiling all the points.'

And certainly points are difficult to catch when doors open and close every moment, and men converse with box-keepers about the numbers of their places, and ladies come in with trailing silk dresses, and express regrets aloud to their friends that they have come too soon, since the first piece is not over yet.

Mr. Greene suffered agonies, while the banging of the doors and the chatter of the incomers deprived his very limited audience, if not of any great intellectual treat, of at least some rather neat points and humorous situations. The actors knew their parts, and also a great deal more, which was

wormwood to the author. Presently one of them made a joke of his own, the indecorum of which enraptured the gallery; while the ladies in the stalls looked at one another significantly, as much as to say they knew how it would be when they were so foolish as to be in time even for the end of a farce.

‘Why the piece is going like steam,’ said Dick cheerfully. ‘Only wasn’t that joke of yours just a leetle broad, Pussy?’

‘If I had a revolver I’d shoot him,’ was Greene’s muttered rejoinder.

Dick thought this referred to his friend the baronet, who had resumed his French novel, so he said nothing.

‘Who is that fellow who has just come in?’ inquired he presently; ‘the man in the centre stall yonder; the actors are all playing at him.’

‘I suppose it’s the critic of the *Thunderer*.’

‘He’s rather late—for a critic—ain’t he?’

‘And quite right too,’ answered Mr. Greene savagely. ‘He was a fool to come

at all, and so am I. Thank Heaven, we are getting to the end of it.'

And indeed the curtain began to drop, then hitched, and stuck half way, amid a tempest of applause, in which cries of 'Author, author!' were occasionally audible.

'You must go on the stage, Pussy; they are calling for you,' cried Dick, clapping his hands, and shrieking out, 'Author, author!' lustier than anybody.

'Be quiet!' cried Greene irascibly. 'They are clapping the carpenter, not me.'

But again the calls for 'Author, author!' grew more clamorous, and presently the boxkeeper touched Greene upon the shoulder, and said, 'Come, sir.'

To see Mr. Greene upon the stage, pale with rage, and showing his teeth by way of smiling, was a very amusing spectacle, and everybody enjoyed it amazingly. But that astute young gentleman was not deceived by these manifestations of delight, and set them down at their true value; not even when Madam Lucinda met him at the wing as he went out, and said in her silvery

voice, 'I congratulate you, Mr. Greene,' was he shaken for an instant in his conviction that 'The Suitors' was a failure.

'I call it a deuced good play, and very well received,' said Dick heartily, when his friend had once more taken his seat beside him; 'I only hope the next will be as good a one. I suppose we must sit it out, mustn't we?'

'I must, at all events, my dear fellow, for Madam Lucinda's sake,' was the other's cold reply. For once this agreeable young gentleman was dreadfully out of temper.

'Who is Madam Lucinda?' inquired Dick. 'I know nothing of her beyond seeing her name in the play-bills.'

'No more do I, except that she is a very beautiful woman.'

'She has got a husband, I suppose, since she calls herself madam?'

'One, at least, I should imagine.'

Then the men who had gone out between the pieces for a breath of fresh air, with the smoke of a cigarette in it, took their places

again, while the orchestra finished its last notes.

'What *is* this play?' inquired Dick, with a great yawn. He did not care for the theatre, and 'only liked the opera for the ballet.

'It's called the "The Physician's Daughter," and it's very dull.'

'I have no doubt of it. If I don't sit it out, and as you must, it seems, just look in at my rooms when it's over, will you, old fellow? Otherwise I shall not see you for a month, and more. I go to Scotland, you know, to-morrow.'

'Yes; you only remained in town for this infernal play of mine.'

'Don't mention it, Pussy; I'm deuced glad to have done it. But I think I'll only wait for the first act of this one. Who is this lady?' (consulting the play-bill). 'Ah, the Physician's maid-servant. Well, she's not so bad; not so bad, I mean, as *your* second young woman. It must be dreadful to be so plain, while your lover *is* calling you so beautiful on the stage. Is this Madam Lucinda?'

‘No, no ; *she* is the Physician’s daughter ; well worth looking at, I can tell you ; but as for her acting—— But here she comes, so that you may judge for yourself.’

The doors in the centre of the scene had been thrown back, and the opening was now filled by a girlish figure, gracefully attired, but owing far more to her native beauty than to external attractions. She was very young, yet of fine proportions, and had a marvellous air of confidence and self-command. She courtesied once in reply to the roar of homage, and slowly came down the stage. Her walk (which so few of her sex can compass on the boards) was perfect ; it had neither swing nor trip in it. Nut-brown hair, confined by a single riband, flowed down her back in a broad shining stream ; her hazel eyes, even in the glare of the gas, wore a gentle and tender expression ; the smile alone, which her part demanded of her at the moment, looked somewhat forced and artificial ; all else was nature’s self.

‘Does she not make up well, Dick, as an *ingénue*?’ said Greene admiringly.

Dick did not answer. His every sense seemed fixed upon the stage ; his eyes, his ears, his very being had concentrated themselves upon this charming figure.

‘The lady has “fetched” him,’ muttered Greene. ‘I thought he was too old a stager by this time to be so hard hit, though I am bound to say I never saw her look so well. He will be disenchanted with her acting, however.’

‘What *are* you at, Dick?’

He might well ask, for his friend had risen from his seat, and was looking beyond the five rows of stalls in front of him as a boy looks over the gate of an apple orchard ; if he saw them at all it was merely as obstacles to be clambered over.

‘Sit *down*, Dick. Are you mad?’

‘I must see her, I must speak to her,’ answered his companion in a hoarse whisper, which fortunately did not extend beyond his friend’s ears ; ‘it is my darling ; it is Lucy Lindon.’



CHAPTER IX.

A LITTLE SUPPER-PARTY.

THE incident that had happened in the stalls of the Imperial was much more 'dramatic,' as Mr. Greene confessed to himself, than any which had taken place that night upon its stage. Even the fate of 'The Suitors' sank into insignificance in his eyes compared with the catastrophe which had befallen his friend. For Mr. Greene, though he made no pretence of being anything that is conventionally termed 'good,' had a loyal heart, and was (for a man) unselfish ; I dare not say more in his favour, for the days when it was permissible to speak favourably of 'the Gentiles who have not the law,' are passed ; now

'principle is first' (as poor Dick would have said in his racing jargon) 'and practice nowhere.' Still it was 'nice' of Pussy to lead his friend out of the theatre, at the risk, nay, with the certainty, of incurring the displeasure of his manageress, for putting such a slight upon her, and to walk him up and down the street outside, like a restive colt.

'I must see her, I *must* see her,' Dick kept on repeating, like a monomaniac with his one melancholy note; and Greene answered soothingly, 'And so you shall,' in a tone such as we use to a spoilt child; 'of course you shall, my dear fellow, but not to-night. You can't interrupt the play to talk to her—though I have no doubt what you would have to say to one another would be much better than the dialogue of the author; the audience wouldn't stand it. And after the play she receives some of her theatrical friends—myself among the number—to supper at her own house. You know from my own case' (and Mr. Greene smiled bitterly at the remembrance of that

mischance of his at Masham Manor) 'how foolish it is to mix up one's love affairs with those of the drama. You can't come out to Kilburn after midnight, and amid the popping of champagne corks, pop——'

'She lives at Kilburn, does she?' interrupted Dick greedily. 'I know nothing about her now, you know,' he added piteously, 'not even that.'

'Just so—and perhaps you had better not know.' Mr. Greene's tone was very grave.

'It's a lie,' cried Dick, beating his hand upon his thigh. 'I wouldn't believe it on your oath.'

'I have stated nothing to the lady's disadvantage, my dear fellow,' was the quiet rejoinder. 'Let us wait for the affidavits to be put in before we answer them.'

'I don't care what they say when they *are* put in,' answered the other passionately.

'My poor Dick, you are off your head to-night; it is useless to talk to you.'

'Where does she live? The street, I mean, in Kilburn, and the number?' He

had pulled out his betting-book (as constant a companion as ever Bible was to Covenanters), and was holding its little pencil in his shaking fingers.

‘I don’t know,’ said Greene plumply; ‘I forget. She’s going to take me with her in her brougham. Don’t be jealous, for another lady will be with us. Even if there was room for you—which there isn’t—you couldn’t say all you wish to Madam Lucinda before another lady.’

This was certainly true, and Talbot’s face acknowledged it. Greene saw that he was yielding, and pressed his point.

‘Your seeing her to-night is out of the question; but I will speak to her—sound her on certain matters which it is without doubt indispensable for you to know—and I’ll let you know about them by letter. You will be at Dunkeld.’

‘I shall be in Pall Mall; I shall not move from London.’ Dick’s voice, generally so flexible and buoyant, was as hard as iron.

‘Very good,’ said Greene. ‘I will come

and breakfast with you to-morrow morning, and tell you all about it.'

'Won't you come to-night—I mean after supper?' he pleaded. 'I shall not go to bed till I see you.'

'If you are so very serious, then of course I will come.'

'You are a real friend, Pussy. You are true——' He wished to say more, but could not; so only grasped the other's hand.

'I believe I am "indifferent honest" at all events, old fellow,' answered Greene deprecatingly; 'but that has its disadvantages. When I do come I shall tell you the truth.'

'No matter. I don't care what the truth may be. I mean to marry Lucy.'

'But suppose she is married already, Dick! and upon my life I think it is so.'

'Then—then I shall go to the devil all the quicker.'

And he ran down the street as if he was already on the road.

Mr. Greene was seldom astonished; but

on this occasion he did experience a certain sensation of surprise.

‘I did not think it was in poor Dick,’ he murmured, ‘to feel so strongly. I thought calf-love was vague and wandering, and would never run a-muck. He will go quicker to the devil without her, he thinks; as if a pair did not go faster than one horse! This shall never be, if I can help it. I shall surely be able to ‘spot’ *one* of her husbands.’ And then he went back into the theatre to give his support to Madam Lucinda in the play, for ~~he~~ had his duty to his manageress to perform as well as his duty to his friend.

The curtain fell amid bouquets and plaudits—as it always does on the first night—but ‘those who knew’ knew the play was doomed. It was better acted than ‘The Suitors’ had been, but it was inordinately dull; the heroine had done her best, but she had been ill supported, and even of *her* Sir Stafford Rue remarked that he would ‘rather have seen her on the trapeze.’

Greene was glad that Dick was not at

hand when this observation was made, but it somehow seemed to strengthen his determination to 'disillusionize' his friend, no matter at what cost to his feelings.

'But has she ever distinguished herself on the bars?' he inquired.

'Certainly,' answered Sir Stafford promptly. 'She comes from the music-halls; did the swinging business at the "Hyperion," was shot from a spring-board sixty feet into the air at the "Verulam," and was eventually discovered to possess dramatic talents.'

'But, surely, her forte is singing.'

'Very likely: she led the virgin chorus in the nunnery of St. Etienne, in Paris, and ran off with the choirmaster.'

'And did she marry him?'

'Over a fiddlestick, perhaps. Married, begad!'

The old gentleman shuffled into his brougham with a snort of contempt.

Greene was sagacious enough to see that this nunnery story had its origin in Lucy's engagement at St. Ethelburga's; and the

probability was that the rest of the baronet's information was to a great extent hypothetical. But such as it was, it did not impress him favourably with Madam Lucinda's antecedents.

He did not go behind the scenes to congratulate the manageress upon her success—which is always done by one's theatrical friends after a first appearance, even if it has been received with cabbage-stalks and orange-peel—but waited for her at the stage-door.

Presently she came out, welcomed him with a pleasant smile, and beckoned him into her carriage, in which a lady friend was already seated. This was Mrs. Eldridge, a staid, middle-aged personage, in grey silk, who accompanied her everywhere, and was said to have been a walking-gentlewoman on the stage of old Drury, who had failed in that unambitious line of business—which seemed probable. That she had nothing to say for herself of course did not prove the fact; language had never been expected of her; but she always

looked ill at ease, nervous, and in some apprehension of her youthful charge.

‘And what did you think of the “Physician’s Daughter,” Mr. Greene?’ asked Madam Lucinda.

‘I thought she was all she ought to be; but I cannot say as much of the play itself.’

‘Ah,’ replied the lady, showing two beautiful rows of teeth—though not in anger—‘that is what everybody tells me. They have nothing, however, to find fault with in “The Suitors.”’

‘Then I am afraid “everybody” was very lenient. I confess I think it was very ill acted.’

‘That is what authors always say of their plays,’ laughed Madam Lucinda. ‘There was, indeed, a hitch or two, no doubt; but your piece will “go” in time, and very smoothly. We were all waiting for you behind the curtain, with our congratulations.’

‘I should have been there, as in duty bound, but for an accident. The friend

who sat with me in the stalls was indisposed——'

'Overcome with the heat, no doubt,' put in Madam Lucinda quickly, yet with an indifferent air. 'It was certainly very warm.'

Mr. Greene could not be sure, from her manner, whether she had recognised Talbot or not.

'We have only a small party at supper to-night,' she went on. 'Mr. Duplex, the dramatist, and a few professional friends, You know Duplex?'

Of course Mr. Greene knew Duplex, which no one acquainted with theatrical affairs could well avoid: a little painted gentleman, with a brown wig and a judicial manner, who had been professionally 'connected with the stage' from a period at which other boys are performing 'The Miller and his Men' with pasteboard puppets, and who, the legend ran, had been on speaking terms with Jack Bannister.

'Your play is a very good one for a first play,' he had observed with closed eyes and

oracular tone on his first introduction to Mr. Greene, and that gentleman detested him accordingly.

Knyvett Place, Kilburn, is one of those pleasant, but quite out-of-the-way little 'places,' which, like many others in the same locality, the passer-by would never notice unless his attention was especially called to it. It stands back behind Knyvett Terrace, and is approached through a gap in it, with iron gates of diminutive size, and by a miniature avenue of trees similar to those which represent the foliage in a Noah's Ark. A place that to the eye of a country novel reader would suggest an abode of 'guilty splendour,' where Vice might revel secure from the public eye, but where, as a matter of fact, head-clerks in city houses mostly lived, and believed themselves to be out of town on the strength of a few square feet of garden ground.

The gateway just admitted the little brougham, and that was all; if Vice had come lolling in his chariot as usually depicted, he would have had to get out and

walk up that last twenty feet of road, with every eye upon his coronet. Nor did the dwelling of Madam Lucinda herself betray any signs of naughtiness. It was prettily but by no means expensively furnished; indeed, its most striking ornaments were flowers, which at that season of the year could be procured at trifling cost. There was a well-stocked flower-box in every window; on the little landing on the stairs were flowers; and out of the bijou drawing-room you looked into a tiny conservatory, into which you could not step for the flowers, which filled it from roof to threshold. If the hostess had no genuine country tastes, she had at least the grace to affect them; and what ought to have carried conviction of her innocence to every heart was the absence of champagne at supper.

For whoever heard of a *bond fide* case of 'guilty splendour' without champagne? Even Mr. Duplex, to whom Greene spoke quite confidentially upon this subject, preferring his friend's interests even to his sense of propriety as a guest, admitted

that much ; ' Though, mind you,' he added frankly, ' I wish there *was* champagne. I call this wishy-washy claret-cup the merest affectation of virtue.'

' But do you think our hostess does affect it ?'

' Certainly. All women affect it—even those who have really got it. It is a case where they think surplusage is no error. If you ask me whether I believe Madam Lucinda to be a Lucretia, that is another matter. I can't tell you. She *may* be. On the other hand, she may be a Lucretia Borgia. Bless your soul, I know nothing about her.'

' Nothing about her ?'

' No more than you do, at least. I know she has been in queer companies—I mean dramatic companies—and is striving to make her way to better things. I honour her for it, and shall presently propose her health—a thing I never did before on any similar occasion except in champagne.'

It was evident that Mr. Duplex attached great significance to the absence of the

missing liquor ; it was also clear that nothing was to be got out of him respecting Madam Lucinda. Perhaps he really knew nothing. His being at her house that night was as natural a thing as to meet the bishop at one's rector's after a confirmation or other ceremonial ; it suggested scarcely any previous acquaintanceship ; it was an official act. Mr. Duplex was a common theatrical godfather, who came to the christening (supper) of every new play.

Mrs. Marmot and Miss Barnes, also present, might be said to be the midwives. They were very literally 'old stagers,' and, though they had long retired from the theatrical profession, took an absorbing interest in such interesting events. They attended at the birth of every infant drama, and very often had to assist, as in the present case, at its obsequies. They were very good-natured, kindly women, but vain beyond all that Solomon himself ever imagined possible in the way of vanity. Each of them asked Mr. Greene whether he remembered her at 'The Lane' (they meant

Drury Lane), and I blush to say that he answered each in the affirmative. He felt confident that they would tell him all about themselves, and prevent him from betraying his ignorance; and they did so. He learnt for the first time that the success of 'Romeo and Juliet' depends solely upon the manner in which Juliet's nurse is acted; and that of 'Othello' upon the performance of Iago's wife.

Besides these ladies, there was the second female character in 'The Physician's Daughter,' and the first in Mr. Greene's own piece. They were young and fairly pretty, and would doubtless have received his best attentions, had not his mind been preoccupied with his hostess, scarce a word or a look from whom escaped him. He blushed to find himself at once a guest and a detective, but he felt his duty to his friend was paramount. What shamed him more was that Madam Lucinda's behaviour was all that it should be—quiet, natural, and, notwithstanding the failure of her little enterprise, serene.

There was only one gentleman present beside himself and Mr. Duplex—a Mr. Herbert Thorne, whom he soon discovered, by his eulogies on that unfortunate drama, to be the author of ‘The Physician’s Daughter.’

It was evident that he was the lion of the entertainment, and, if what Mr. Duplex hinted was correct, for an excellent reason—he was the man that was going to pay for it.

‘Pays for everything, my good sir ; and quite right too, for he’s got heaps of money. He will bring out another play or two, which will be damned like this, and then he will take a theatre all to himself, which will be the ruin of him.’

After which biographical sketch of his future career, Mr. Greene heard him assure Mr. Thorne that ‘with a little careful pruning, sir, that play will leave nothing to be desired.’

The author shook his head ; he thought there was nothing to be desired as it stood.

It was of Mr. Thorne that Mr. Greene

had his suspicions, since he could scarcely entertain them of anybody else. He was young and rather good-looking, and, though full of conceit and self-importance, condescended to pay Madam Lucinda many compliments, which she received as though they had been her daily bread. He was evidently an *habitué* of the house, for he inquired after her chickens.

‘Chickens!’ ejaculated Mr. Duplex, who, never having seen chickens on the stage could not imagine any one having an interest in such things.

‘They are Mrs. Eldridge’s pets,’ explained the hostess. ‘She has lived in the country all her life, and can’t get on without them.’

Mrs. Eldridge nodded assent, looking at the same time so extremely frightened, that Mr. Duplex whispered, ‘I believe she stole ’em.’

He had drunk a great deal of the claret-cup by that time, and it was by no means so wishy-washy as he had described it to be.

Presently he made his speech, as he had threatened, in honour of their hostess ; and, to Mr. Greene's amazement, Mr. Thorne acknowledged it. There had been, it was true, some casual mention of 'The Physician's Daughter' in the course of it, and it was just possible that the author had thought that sufficient ground for getting on his legs ; but certainly, coupled with his personal acquaintance with the chickens, it did look suspicious.

'Why the deuce,' thought Mr. Greene, 'should he return thanks for Madam Lucinda ?'

Soon afterwards the party broke up, and everybody rose to go except Mr. Thorne.

'Perhaps he is not going *at all* ; perhaps he lives here ; perhaps (oh, joy !)' thought Mr. Greene, 'he is *Mr.* Lucinda.'

It was quite possible that his hostess might have married this man, and yet retained the name by which she was known upon the stage ; and in that case Dick would be secure from any serious entanglement. He made up his mind, however,

not to give up his point of staying to the last until he should be turned out of the place, in order to discover this for certain. Mr. Lucinda, if such he were, would scarcely go through the farce of leaving him in the house, and then returning to it after his departure.

Mr. Greene had already suffered much, and had even done wrong to his own conscience for the sake of his friend ; but when the other guests had taken their departure, he found a worse ordeal than all that had yet taken place awaiting him. Mr. Thorne wished to ask Madam Lucinda's opinion regarding certain points in 'The Physician's Daughter,' and this involved quotation—and Mr. Greene's listening to it. The man had an infamous delivery—

'The chariot wheels jarred in the gates
Through which he drove them forth.'

And the chariot, besides, was not worth driving.

'I am afraid I weary you, Mr. Greene,' observed the author, after half an hour of this.

His tone was not, however, apologetic ; it seemed to say, ' But you have only to go to bed.'

' You weary me very much,' said Greene frankly. (How these two young dramatists hated one another !) ' But I have got a few remarks to make to Madam Lucinda before I go respecting my own piece.'

' Oh, dear !' said Mr. Thorne, ' I did not know that I was delaying business of such great importance ;' and after a few more quotations he took himself off.

Greene noticed, not for the first time, that his hostess wore a wedding-ring. It signified little, of course ; it might be only ' fifteen shillings' worth of respectability ; still, it gave him hopes that, though she was probably not married to this man, she might have been married to somebody else—no matter who, so long as he was alive.

' You wish to speak to me about " The Suitors " ?' said she quietly, when he was left alone with her and Mrs. Eldridge.

'My dear madam, I confess that I do not; that was a mere subterfuge to get rid of Mr. Thorne. But I have something of importance to say to you—of a private nature.'

And he glanced at the 'walking gentlewoman' as though he would like to see her walk.

'I have no secrets from Mrs. Eldridge,' observed Madam Lucinda dryly, and with a certain severity.

'She thinks I am going to make love to her on her own account,' thought Mr. Greene; 'and, what is worse, she doesn't like it.'

There was no alternative but to tell his tale in the presence of a third person.

'There was with me in the theatre to-night, madam, an old friend of mine—and yours—one Richard Talbot.'

Madam Lucinda did not move a muscle.

'Talbot, Talbot,' she said; 'the name sounds familiar to me.'

'W' v, Lucy,' cried Mrs. Eldridge, start-

ing to her feet, 'it's Master Dick, from Durnton !'

'Of course it is, mother,' answered Lucy calmly. 'I saw him in the stalls to-night. Well, sir, yes, I know him.'



CHAPTER X.

‘I WILL NOT SEEK RICHARD OUT.’

WITH that ‘Yes, I know him,’ of Madam Lucinda’s, a strange change came over her face. It was calm and quiet enough, and her eyes regarded Mr. Greene with steady composure ; but he felt that under that mask of gentleness and grace and beauty there was a sharp pain : only a quiver of the nostril and a tightening of the lip betrayed it ; and only a kind heart would have perceived it. But Mr. Greene’s heart was very kind.

‘I have come here to-night, madam, as Richard Talbot’s friend,’ said he gently, ‘upon a very difficult errand.’

‘Let us say “delicate,” Mr. Greene,’

put in his hostess quickly ; ' your difficulty lies in your regard for my feelings ; do not spare them, and then your task will be easy. Speak to me,' she went on in bitter scorn, ' as to a low-born woman who once attempted (and failed) to induce a young gentleman of fortune and position to marry her, and who afterwards became an adventuress upon the stage. What need is there of circumlocution in such a case ?'

The humility of her words contrasted strangely with the haughtiness of her tone and carriage ; it was as though a penitent, instead of with sheet and taper, should make her confession in royal robes.

' You came here,' she continued, ' to see me at my worst, and to report upon it. I do not say,' she added, for the colour had rushed into the cheeks of her young guest, ' that you did it willingly. The part of a spy is not suited to your character, Mr. Greene, and you play it ill.'

' Let me relieve you from your embarrassment,' she went on, in gentler tones. ' I will tell you my story without putting

you to the pain (for you are a gentleman) of cross-examination. You may not believe me, but any inquiries you may think it worth your while to make, will corroborate me in every particular : Mrs. Eldridge here is my mother. I have lived with her ever since I left Aunt Susan's roof. My life has been as free from taint—though not perhaps from temptation—as that of your own sister, or of her mother before her.'

'I believe it,' cried Mr. Greene, with sudden impulse; he could not help it. Her words, her looks, her tone, carried conviction with them; and he was too generous not to acknowledge it.

'I thank you,' answered she gravely, 'and the more so because I know you wished to have found it otherwise.'

Poor Mr. Greene grew purple under her keen eyes. 'Indeed, madam, you do me wrong,' he stammered.

'I do not, sir. What you hoped to have to say to your friend was this : "The girl that you went mad about when you were a boy has become an abandoned woman ;

wanton, mercenary, vile. To have married her in the old days would have been humiliation ; but to do so now would be irredeemable disgrace and ruin.”’

Mr. Greene felt that he was being beaten all along the line, and that unless he was content to fail most utterly in his embassy, he must abandon the plan he had marked out for himself. It was necessary to change front in the face of the enemy.

‘You speak of Talbot’s ruin, madam,’ said he, ‘as though it were an event dependent upon a contingency ; I am afraid it is a certainty. I am not quite sure even that it has not already happened.’

‘I have heard something of this,’ said Madam Lucinda, sighing ; ‘that Richard was very wild and extravagant I guessed—nay, knew.’

‘Extravagant is no word for his conduct, madam. In these last six months he has dissipated a fortune. Before the year is out he may have spent his all. If I possessed the sister of whom you have spoken, I would as soon see her married to a beggar

as to Richard Talbot. No hand can hold him ; no tongue can warn him ; he is a bórñ spendthrift.'

'Poor Richard !' said she gently.

'Dear Master Dick was always lavish, you know, Lucy,' put in Mrs. Eldridge. 'He never could say "No."'

'He was always generous,' she answered quietly, 'too generous ; and thoughtless for himself, and too easily led by others.'

'You have read his character well,' said Mr. Greene, who flattered himself that matters were taking a good turn ; 'he has a good heart, but is a mere creature of impulse. It will be easy to show that to become his wife would be a misfortune to any woman ; but in your case I appeal to no motives of self-interest. I would rather point out to you that when the crash comes—as come it will—and Talbot is penniless, it would be an ill service to him on your part to have married him, for such an alliance (since you bade me speak plainly) must needs alienate his friends, and deprive him of such assistance as might be

even then in their power to render him.'

'I see; they would let him starve in company, but not alone—— Well, perhaps it would not be necessary to appeal to their tender mercies.'

She threw a glance around the dainty little room, which the other interpreted at once.

'I entreat you not to think of *that*,' he pleaded. 'You only know him as what he was; you do not understand what has become his second nature; all that is here, and which you are proposing to yourself to give him, would be a mere drop in the ocean of his expenditure. The little hoard which (if I am right) your hard work and prudence have acquired, and which is threatened even now by the misfortune of to-night, would not supply his extravagances for a week. He would bitterly regret having beggared you, as well as himself, but he would do it. You might as well hope for moderation in the drunkard. I am ashamed to speak such words of my friend, but it is the truth.'

‘Poor Richard, poor Richard!’ sighed she again, and this time the tears were in her lustrous eyes. It was plain she really loved him. Mr. Greene perceived the extremity of the danger, and became audacious.

‘Yes, “poor” you may well call him, for it is but anticipating matters, and that only by a month or two; and he is not only poor, but proud. If you have any notion of supporting him, when the worst has happened to him, by your dramatic talents’ (he was right—she *had*; for the second time the colour came into her cheeks, and told him her thought was read), ‘you may dismiss it at once; that generous impulse can never bear fruit. Richard Talbot would never stoop to be dependent on his wife’s exertions, and least of all, permit her to act upon the stage.’

‘You think so,’ said she quietly.

‘I am positively certain of it,’ said Mr. Greene. He was not at all certain of it, but he contrived to look so.

‘I think the gentleman speaks very sensibly, Lucy,’ observed Mrs. Eldridge.

'Think of Master Richard—and him a Talbot—living on your salary at Narcissus Hall, or those sort of places; it would almost make the old Squire turn in his grave.'

'I care nothing about the old Squire,' answered Lucy fiercely. 'Had it not been for him——' Here she stopped herself, though with a visible effort; then added abruptly, 'I only care for Richard.'

'In that case, my dear madam,' put in Mr. Greene, 'I am sure you will do what you can to discourage him should he renew his attentions to you. To act otherwise would be to do him no real kindness, and yourself an irreparable injury.'

'I shall not seek Richard out,' answered she calmly. 'I shall lay no snares for him such as his friends may have pictured: (if I had had the will to win him, I could have done so long ago in spite of them, without the aid of artifice). But if he comes to me, as in the old days, I will not pass my word (as I did once) to refuse to see him.' She hesitated a moment, then added ab-

ruptly, 'That is the best—or the worst—that I can say to you at present respecting this matter, Mr. Greene.'

'It is at all events more than I had any right to ask,' answered the young fellow frankly. 'I am deeply obliged to you for the confidence you have extended to me, and for the patience with which you have met what may well have seemed an impertinent appeal.'

He rose and bade her farewell. The dawn was already streaming into the room as he did so, and he could not help noticing how fresh and radiant she looked, despite its searching beams. How different from most women under such circumstances; how very different from what might have been expected in her case! His surprise at her mere physical appearance was, however, slight indeed compared with that evoked in him by her character.

'She may have been acting from first to last,' he murmured to himself as he walked up the little avenue; 'but, if so, she should be at the head of her profession.'

‘Well, mother, he is gone at last, and it is time for bed,’ said Lucy, kissing her.

‘Time indeed, my dear,’ answered Mrs. Parkes, with a sigh. ‘At Durnton it would have been almost time for us to be getting up.’

‘We have changed all that, dear,’ returned the other, with a tenderness in her tone that had hitherto been lacking; ‘and, I hope, not for the worse.’

‘No, dear, no; I am sure *I* ought not to complain.’

‘Yet something troubles you, mother. What is it?’

‘Nothing, darling. I was only thinking what a nice young man that Mr. Greene is.’

Lucy smiled.

‘Yes, he is nice, and honest too, which is a rarer quality. But what is that to us?’

‘Nothing. I wish it was—I wish——’

‘What do you wish? You have only to ask, if I can grant it you.’

‘Well—you won’t be cross with me, my darling?—I know it’s no use, but I wish

you had set your heart on Mr. Greene instead of Master Richard.'

A bird was singing at the open window, but his song was not more fresh and blithe and joyous than Lucy's answering laugh. She kissed her mother again, and ran upstairs.

'Ah!' murmured Mrs. Parkes, 'she loves him still. I have not heard her laugh like that for many a day. How can she be so foolish? I was just the same with Robert, till I became his wife. What fools we women are!'



CHAPTER XI.

DICK IS RESOLVED.

SINCE the disreputable lives of so many young men are accounted for on the ground of their having been crossed in love in (legal) infancy, one is compelled to believe that the plea has something in it—that their inability to secure the object of their desire does in some sort warp the thread of their lives. But in such cases, it is to be observed that the ‘object’ is always a ‘desirable one;’ not by any means the daughter of the young gentleman’s father’s game-keeper for example, but some young person of position and property. I am afraid, therefore, that Mr. Richard Talbot’s riotous living is to be excused on no such ground.

Perhaps he would have been just as wild and extravagant if he had had his way from the first. Yet it is certain that, after his fashion, he was deeply, or at all events passionately, attached to Lucy Lindon. She had made a deeper impression on his heart than any other woman whom he had since met. It may be said, indeed, that his choice in that way had been limited—at least, as to quality; but then his heart, though it was susceptible enough, had been touched by no other woman at all. Fool as he was, looked at from a business point of view, he was not so weak as even men of business sometimes are, in taking for affection what was only the promptings of self-interest. He had a very shrewd suspicion that both ‘lover and friend’ would alike ‘stand afar off’ from him when he had come to the end of his capital. Perhaps he made exceptions in favour of Aunt Edith and Leonard Greene; but his view of life—thanks, very likely, to the sentiments he heard expressed by his Turf acquaintances—was, for such a ‘frolicsome

blade,' little short of cynical. His accounts, which, as we have said, he scrupulously kept, informed him that he was on the high road to ruin; and though, of course, he still looked forward to recoup himself by a lucky investment on the racecourse—for, 'Hang it all! one can't *always* lose, you know'—he had a strong presentiment that he should pursue that road to its terminus. 'It is better to be born lucky than rich,' was an aphorism that was frequently on his lips; and it is a very true aphorism, if this rider be appended to it, 'if one intends to live by betting.' 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die,' was another saw which, though he never uttered it, he might have taken for his motto, since, with the trifling alteration, 'for to-morrow we may have nothing to live upon,' it had become his rule of life.

Then suddenly, in the midst of this desperate career, he had seen once again this woman who loved him.

The usual metaphor under such circumstances, of one in the desert who comes

upon a cooling spring, would not have suited him. He was by no means in a desert; he was rather like some traveller who in the tropical forest, amid the most luscious and luxuriant vegetation, finds his sated eye resting on a home scene—a field, a farm, a flower—such as he knew in distant England. Lucy seemed a link, too, with his better life; strange to say, even with the father who had forbidden him to wed her. The very sight of her had brought his boyhood back to him, with its natural impulses and simple pleasures. He had never been so happy, never, as in that moment when he had plighted troth to her in that old Durnton ruin; and though he had idealised that scene, herself included, he knew her to be thrice as beautiful to-day as she was then. Beauty, as has been sagely said, is but skin deep; but then so many other things in so many people are of the same depth, such as faith, opinions, honesty, and good temper; and such as it is, barring paint and powder, it is at least genuine. I am inclined to think, indeed,

notwithstanding all that has been said, and with the best of motives, in its depreciation, that beauty is the most attractive thing, while it lasts, that human nature possesses.

‘If she loves me, if she only still loves me!’ murmured Dick to himself over a cigar as he walked home from the theatre—a somewhat euphemistic phrase, since what he really meant was, ‘If she has only not taken up with somebody else!’ For was it likely she should have retained her affection for him all these years, and never reposed it elsewhere, when the tie between them had been sundered by consent on both sides? Why should she not have met one to love her, and whose love she might return? Among the few good attributes still belonging to him, Dick possessed a sense of justice; and he felt that he had no right to blame his Lucy even if she had married another man. This did not, however, prevent him from hoping she hadn’t. He had no one’s prejudices to consider now, and if he found her free, and she was

willing, he would without doubt make her his wife.

These were the thoughts that filled his mind that night, and in the early morning, after his visit to the Imperial. He made no attempt to go to bed—indeed, it was not his custom so to do until after several of the small hours—but passed the time walking up and down his sitting-room, and consuming immense cigars. He knew that Greene made a practice of retiring to rest comparatively early, but he had such a confidence in his friendship—or, as he expressed it to himself, felt that he was ‘such a real good fellow’—that he had no doubt of his looking in, on his way from Knyvett Place.

Nor was he disappointed. After the distant thunder of the country carts (which even on Sunday makes itself audible) had passed away, and a little before the clatter of the milk-pails commenced, Mr. Greene arrived

‘Look here, old fellow, you will have some soda and brandy,’ were Dick’s first words.

Though he had been expecting him with such eagerness, he was positively afraid to hear what he might have to say, and wished to delay his revelation.

'Thank you, yes, I will,' said Mr. Greene; 'for the fact is, we had claret-cup for supper. There was no champagne.'

This delicate attempt at reassurance was utterly thrown away upon his host, to whom such social straws did not show which way the wind blew.

'Then perhaps you'd like some now,' he answered simply; 'only there's no ice.'

'No, no; I want nothing except to go to bed. Only, of course, I have come to tell you first about Madam Lucinda.'

'She *is* married, then,' moaned Dick, looking the picture of woe. 'Oh, Pussy! are you sure she is *really* married?'

'I don't think she is married at all.'

'Thank Heaven!' ejaculated Dick, helping himself to his friend's soda and brandy; for he needed it.

'Well, I don't know about *that*,' replied Greene doubtfully. 'I am by no means

certain of its being a providential circumstance. I have found out nothing to the lady's personal discredit, but she has played at "The Mirabel," and all sorts of queer places ; and she knows, I should say, some queerish people.'

'So do I,' said Dick cheerfully, 'and so do you, for that matter.'

'Thank you,' said Mr. Greene ; 'speak for yourself. The exigencies of my profession may bring me into contact——'

'Confound your profession !' interrupted Dick ; 'I want to hear all about Lucy.'

'All about her, my dear fellow, I can't tell you ; and perhaps if I could, you wouldn't thank me. From what I have seen of her, I am sorry—I mean I am bound to say that I believe her to be an honest woman. Mrs. Eldridge, you see, her chaperone, is her mother.'

'Stuff and nonsense ! Annie Parkes is her mother.'

'Then she has two mothers. That puts a stop to this unfortunate affair. No man

could marry with the prospect of two mothers-in-law! It would be suicidal mania.'

'No, no, I understand; her mother takes care of her, under an assumed name; a gentle, washed-out looking woman, who looks afraid of her life.'

'That is certainly an accurate portrait; though as respects her daughter, I don't think the last is a good sign.'

'Her husband—poor George—used to beat her,' explained Dick; 'that has made her nervous.' ('This is a nice family,' murmured Mr. Greene). 'But, bless you, she's a most excellent soul,' continued Dick. 'She was my foster-mother.'

'Then you can't marry her daughter,' said Mr. Greene decisively. 'It's within the prohibited degrees; perhaps you have never read the table of affinity.'

'Never,' replied Dick contemptuously, 'and I don't intend to read 'em. Were there any—any men at the supper?'

'Of course there were: lots—at least

three. Two of them admired the young lady very much: as to that being the case with me I am certain, and as to the other, I had great difficulty to sit him out.'

'To sit him *out*!' echoed Dick indignantly; 'what, at three o'clock in the morning?'

'Well, it was at least that; I should say nearer four. These theatrical people are very queer, my dear fellow, I do assure you.'

Dick mixed a glass of soda and brandy for himself (very strong) and frowned.

'I had a long talk with Madam Lucinda, who was very frank with me. She is very different from what she was when you knew her, I can tell you. If you fancy, for one thing, that she is ready to throw herself into your arms, as formerly——'

'She never was,' interrupted Dick sharply.

'Then I have been misinformed,' was his friend's cool rejoinder. 'However, your relations are not now what they used to be:

I mean, of course, your relations with *her*; if you imagine yourself to be a great "catch" to her in a matrimonial point of view, you are quite mistaken. She supports herself very comfortably by her own talents, to begin with; and secondly, though not what is called in society, she has heard something of your goings on.'

For the second time in his life I have to record this incident in the biography of Mr. Richard Talbot—he blushed.

'Oh, yes. She knows all about you; very likely, even the details. But at all events, she is possessed of the very important fact that you are a spendthrift.'

'What a fool, what an idiot, I have been!' groaned Dick, bringing his fist down upon the table.

'Of course you have; let us try to keep it in the past tense. You are now hoping to crown the edifice of your folly with a veritable cap and bells by marrying a play-actress.'

'I am not,' answered Dick vehemently.

‘I am going to do the only sensible thing I ever did in my life.’

‘What is that?’ inquired Mr. Greene, with an air of curiosity. ‘I should like to see it.’

‘So you shall. You shall be my “best man” at the wedding.’

‘You are counting your chickens, Master Dick—or at least if not quite that, you are decidedly premature. It takes two fools to make such a marriage as you are proposing to yourself; and I give this lady some credit for good sense. You must forgive my plain speaking, old fellow.’

‘I do, old friend. It runs off me like water from a duck’s back. I know you mean nothing but good to me. I shall feel that, whatever happens. Next to Lucy—and Aunt Edie—I can’t desert Aunt Edie though she has given me up—I like you, Pussy.’

‘And I like *you*, Dick, though you don’t deserve it. I am sorry to hear, however, that your Aunt Edith has given you up.’

‘Well, Father Vane has informed her, it seems, that I am delivered over unto Satan ; and perhaps I am.’

‘He ought to know,’ said Mr. Greene sarcastically (he did not like any one to abuse his friend except himself). ‘But it appears to me that you are delivering *yourself* over to that personage. Do you really mean to tell me that if she is weak enough to have you, you are resolved to marry this woman ?’

‘Most certainly. To-morrow, if possible ; if not, on the first lawful day.’

‘Then I have nothing more to say,’ sighed Mr. Greene, and went his way.

It is not only the wise who can be determined ; and he well knew that his friend could be as resolute as Solomon (who had a weakness by-the-bye for more than one Lucy) when he had once made up his mind.



CHAPTER XII.

‘IF I COULD SEE MY WAY.’

THERE is a general notion amongst us that a sustained effort on behalf of any good end is not to be expected save from those who have some clearly defined lines of faith, or, at all events, some leading principles of action ; and on the whole it is a correct one. We do not, as a rule, find impulsive persons, given to no serious thoughts, to be depended on in any protracted struggle on the side of either justice or benevolence, however much they may sympathise with those virtues. And it is the same with their social relations ; they will open their purses to a friend, if that sort of aid be necessary, with a readiness which I am

afraid is sometimes wanting in individuals of better principle ; but they cannot stand any continuous strain upon their sympathies. Like the French infantry they charge with enthusiasm, but if they meet with discouragement—unexpected obstacles or even a cold acknowledgment of their services—their alliance ceases to be valuable ; they cannot stand the trenches ; labour and trouble are hateful to them. If they miss the object they have aimed at for their friend's sake, at the first shot, their good intentions evaporate.

This would probably have been the course of conduct to be expected by his acquaintances of Mr. Leonard Greene : they thought that he was even as one of themselves, because he had certain qualities—such as lightness of heart, and good-nature, in common with them ; but those who knew him best would, I think, have looked to him for better things ; for as Dick would have said, there were speed and bottom in him. If that compliment seems too high, let me remark at least, that just as

a selfish man will now and then unexpectedly slough, as it were, his natural skin, and make quite a sacrifice of himself, so the man of impulse will now and then go right through with a business he has once begun, and with characteristic vigour.

Leonard Greene had done his best, as we have seen, to save his friend first from the object of his affections, and then from himself; and he might well have been forgiven—especially since he had sat up all night to do him these services—if he had now folded his hands and gone to sleep after them. Moreover, it may be wondered why he should have thought it necessary to take any pains at all to prevent his friend's marriage with Madam Lucinda; at the worst it would only, as he confessed to himself, be hastening the ruin that was sure to come, and he was the last man to entertain such conventional ideas as would be shocked at a young gentleman's 'marrying beneath him.' But the fact was that, though, in the first instance, he had been the advocate of his friend's interests and of

those alone (all he had known of Lucy Lindon, save for her unfortunate appearance in the Camera Obscura at Swanborough Hill, having been, let it be remembered, from the lips of her detractors, and therefore to her disadvantage), he had now become the advocate of another party in the suit—though on the same side—namely, of Lucy herself.

It was for her sake, as well as Richard's, though not indeed in the same proportion, that Mr. Greene felt bound to oppose this projected match.

Her frankness, and perhaps her beauty (though he would not have owned to that), had touched him; and he was resolved that, if he could help it, her little savings should never be swallowed up in the great gulf of his friend's excess. He had a secret consciousness that his admiration of this woman—extorted from him as it had been in spite of himself—had made him an inefficient advocate with her of her own and his friend's interests. He had not used such plainness of speech as the occasion

demanded, and as he had intended to use ; he had spared her, where it had been weakness to do so, namely, in the picture he had drawn of the ruin that must overtake her if she listened to Richard Talbot's wooing. Dick's mention of his Aunt Edith had at once suggested to Mr. Greene the ally most likely to be of service ; of the same sex as the lady herself, and therefore not likely to be moved as he had been by her attractions ; and one moreover who had already combated her upon this very question, and come off victorious. He felt that not a moment was to be lost, if either of these two young people were to be saved : and, therefore, that very morning, after but scant measure of sleep, Mr. Greene presented himself in Gresham Street.

His visit was, therefore, made upon the Sunday morning, a circumstance which the urgency of the case might well have excused ; only, unfortunately, Mr. Greene had forgotten it *was* Sunday. Folks who go to church are at all events in a better position than those who don't for knowing the day

of the week, and our young friend, I regret to say, was in this respect at a disadvantage. Sister Edith's view of the seventh day was not, of course, so severe as some people's—as that of Mrs. Freeman would have been, for example—but it was mapped out for her, like a chess-board, with 'services' from Matins to Vespers—in which not a square was vacant, and certainly not for such a person as a morning caller. She therefore received Mr. Greene with a certain austerity of manner, which at first staggered, and, when he found out the reason, irritated him exceedingly. He revered Sister Edith on account of her practical benevolence, and it put him out of patience to think how she wasted herself (such was his view of the matter) over Sundays, priests, and saints' days.

'It must be an important affair, Mr. Greene, that brings you here on a Sunday morning,' was the remark with which she met him. Mr. Greene thought instantly of that exception which is made respecting one's ox or one's ass falling into a pit—and

was there not an ass at all events about to fall into a pit in this case? but his good manners saved him from the quotation. What he did say, however, was, 'One man esteemeth one day above another, another esteemeth every day alike.'

Sister Edith blushed, for she felt herself reproved; like most ladies of her peculiar views, she had had the Scriptures strained for her through the ecclesiastical sieve, and was not so fully acquainted with them as might be wished in their entirety. If she had been less angelic, the thought of the Devil quoting Scripture for his own ends would immediately have occurred to her; but as it was, she only sweetly said, 'I beg your pardon, sir; it is true I have no right to judge you.'

This brought her visitor (figuratively) to his knees at once.

'You are twenty thousand times better than I, madam, only one likes to have one's own opinion. It is, however, as you have said, no light matter that causes me to intrude upon you. Your nephew is on the very verge of——'

'What, what?' ejaculated Sister Edith, clasping her hands.

'Marrying an actress.'

She had thought he was going to say 'Death' or 'Ruin,' and tried in vain to look as if this news had not relieved her.

'Oh, Mr. Greene, how terrible!'

'Well, it's very bad of course; I come to you as a last chance. Dick himself is deaf to expostulation upon the matter, but perhaps you might persuade the lady to reject him. It is Lucy Lindon.'

'Lucy Lindon!'

She was duly shocked, of course, but what was demanded of her was at least more practicable than if the 'young person' had been unknown to her.

Then he unfolded to her how it had all happened; nor did he refrain from dwelling upon his friend's habits of extravagance, or withhold from her the increasing peril of his social position. With this, however, she appeared to be already acquainted, or perhaps considerations of a higher kind, overpowered her sorrow upon that account.

‘My poor Dick! my poor, poor Dick!’ was all she said. The words might have been addressed to a pet canary suffering from the pip, but the tone had such pity and love in it as touched the other’s tender heart to its very core.

‘Your nephew loves you still, madam, he said, ‘and very dearly, though, as he thinks, you have abandoned him as good-for-nothing.’

‘I have *not* abandoned him,’ cried she vehemently, ‘or at least,’ she added, with more caution, ‘if I could see my way to help him I would take it.’

‘I felt sure you would, Miss Talbot, when I came here. Here is the address of Madam Lucinda—that is the lady’s stage name.’

Sister Edith sighed as seraphs may be supposed to sigh when allusion is made to ‘another place.’

‘Of course I will go,’ she said.

‘There is no time to be lost in going,’ suggested Mr. Greene.

‘I understand—— I am afraid I must

leave you now' (she already heard with her mind's ear an importunate little bell tinkling). 'A thousand thanks to you for coming to me.'

These two people, as far asunder in all else as the poles, had at least this idea in common (and it was a correct one), that there was something of sterling worth in the other.

Mr. Greene went home to his lodgings, and, after reading an adverse criticism in the *Observer* on his play, to bed. Sister Edith repaired to St. Ethelburga's, where she tried, and miserably failed, to avoid thinking of poor Dick and his troubles. It was out of the question, of course, that she could pay her visit to Madam—what was her name—that unhappy Lucy Lindon 'that was'—upon a Sunday. But she would go to her at an early hour to-morrow morning.

About the time when Father Vane was commencing his sermon, Dick was getting into a hansom cab, and giving this order to the driver—'Knyvett Place, Kilburn.'



CHAPTER XIII.

RELICS.

AFTER his friend's departure, Richard had given himself up to a new indulgence—reflection. His mind was quite made up as to what he would do, but he could not decide as to how he should do it. Should he write to his Lucy, or should he go to her? That was the question. He would have had no doubts if he had been certain that she *was* his Lucy; but of this, in spite of Mr. Greene's somewhat unwilling assurances to that effect, he did not feel confident. He had had many buffets from fortune of late on that smooth ground the racecourse, and maybe he thought that to

find her fancy-free was too much luck for him.

He had devoted himself for some hours to literary composition, yet without being able to please that most kindly of critics, the author. When he wrote naturally—that is, passionately—the suspicion that his passion might be misplaced troubled him sorely: not that he grudged the waste of force, but feared the force of ridicule. ‘Dear Dick, I should have been charmed,’ she might reply, ‘but I have been married (or as bad) this ever so long.’

A rebuff of that kind, however agreeably conveyed, would have been terrible. When, on the other hand, he compelled his pen to be calm and reasonable, he felt that it was misrepresenting him. Again, if he should seek a personal interview, to find that he had been forestalled in this woman’s affections would inflict upon him not only ridicule, but distress and pain, which she would also share; and, on the other hand, he longed to see her, to speak with her, to touch her, with a yearning even greater

than that of the old days. The sight of her, even on the stage, had set him aflame ; or rather the embers of his old love, which had not died out (in spite of much that had gone to quench them), were once more alive and stirring. His affections were of that common, but by no means valueless, kind, which demand a visible object. He had no imagination which could picture the loved one in absence as though she were present ; verses to his mistress' eyebrows were impossible to him, and if they had been possible, would have given him no satisfaction. If for this lack of fancy Dick is to be called coarse, nine men out of ten are coarse. His term for poetry was 'rot ;' and in so calling it he manifested no universal callousness, but only an unusual courage. He possessed courage, and honour too (within limits) ; generosity, kindness of heart, and, as we have seen, a sense of justice. He was weak and foolish, but by no means despicable ; nor were his present feelings such as he had any need to be ashamed of. After a long struggle,

he resolved to present himself in Knyvett Place in person.

Figure him in the hansom, 'shooting his linen' (pulling out his shirt-cuffs to the uttermost) in nervous excitement, and picturing to himself his probable reception—how she would look, what she would say; and wondering to himself whether he should presently come back again crowned with bliss, his Lucy's accepted lover for the second time, or whether (as he put it in his simple fashion) it would all turn out 'a frost and a sell.' Of course, he 'kept' the hansom—it was his custom, though he was stopping anywhere for hours; and in this case it seemed especially necessary that he should have a place of immediate retreat—something to throw himself into, and be whisked away in on the instant.

Madam Lucinda was 'at home' (she did not go to church in the morning, it seemed, or perhaps her late hours of the preceding night made this occasion an exceptional one), and Dick was ushered into the little drawing-room. If his enemies said he had

no heart, they wronged him ; for it was palpitating violently, beating like the strokes of a piston, and, as it ebbed and flowed, his still boyish cheeks grew white and red.

Presently Lucy entered, with pale face, but wonderfully calm and self-possessed. She was elegantly dressed, and had a style of fashion (or so he thought it) about her which greatly increased her visitor's embarrassment. The little speeches which he had prepared coming along in the cab fled from his brain ; he could not address this gorgeous being as he had intended. She was not the Lucy Lindon of the old days at all, though he confessed to himself that she looked a thousand times more beautiful.

‘How are you, Mr. Talbot ?’

This might have chilled him but for the touch of her hand, which

‘Throbbled his pulses with the fulness of the Spring.’

His embarrassment was at once exchanged for delirium.

‘Oh, Lucy !’ he murmured, ‘Lucy !’

‘To what am I indebted, sir, for the honour of this visit ?’

It was cruel of her to torment him thus ; but then women are always cruel with us poor worms when on the hook.

‘I—I—ought to have come before,’ he stammered, ‘long, long ago ; I was a fool to allow myself to be torn away from you.’

She opened wide her hazel eyes, as if in astonishment at this extraordinary language.

‘Why so ?’ she inquired.

‘Because I love you—because I have always loved you.’

‘You loved Lucy Lindon when you were a boy, Mr. Talbot. All that is over.’

‘And why should it not begin again ?’ put in Richard naïvely.

‘Because we are so different, both of us—I especially.’

‘Now it is coming,’ he thought ; ‘she is going to confess things.’

He wanted to murder ‘some person unknown.’

‘You are led by a false light, sir,’ she went on, ‘merely the reflection of that which once guided you. You may think

you love me still, and I thank you for the compliment' (here she curtseyed), 'but you are deceiving yourself.'

'I am quite sure I love you, Lucy. I wish I could be sure that you could love me.'

'Might, could, would, or should, do you mean, sir?'

Dick was scarlet. This woman, it seemed, could read his inmost thoughts.

'Well, of course, if you love anybody else, Lucy, better than me,' he stammered, 'I cannot ask you to marry me. I have lost all claim upon you; I feel that. It is true it was you who gave me up, and not I you; but it was my people who were the cause. I have no right to reproach you, whatever may have happened.'

Here he grew quite pale again.

'What you say is but just,' returned she quietly. 'I have had a hard life, Richard, among hard people. But they were not all hard: some of them have been very kind to me for my own sake, and others were kind after another fashion. I took my own

way in life (as you have heard), and it has been full of peril. Your people will have more reason now than ever to distrust and disown me.'

Richard made a gesture of impatience. He cared nothing for the opinion of his 'people.' Every moment he felt himself drawn more and more towards this idol of his boyhood, whom he now beheld transformed into a veritable goddess.

'I say, Richard, you should well weigh this matter—even if you do not value the advice of others—before renewing an attachment which has been already condemned, and which has since become far more open to condemnation. To pretend that I do not love you is a crime—a crime,' she repeated vehemently, 'which I will not twice commit; but——'

'Lucy, my darling Lucy!' he cried, springing to his feet.

'Stop, Richard,' said she sternly; 'it shall not be said that I have taken advantage of your impetuous passion to wrest from you a rash proposal. You must know who it is whom you would marry.'

‘I do know her,’ he answered ; ‘the only woman I have ever loved.’

A smile—I am afraid a somewhat cynical smile—curled her proud lip.

‘You *did* know her,’ she said, ‘and you once loved her ; but if you knew her now, you might cease to love her. Richard, I have had presents given me by one who loved me truly, and I returned his love.’

‘I don’t care if you did, Lucy,’ was his magnanimous avowal, ‘if only you will now be mine.’

‘Stop, sir, stop ; I returned his love, but I did not return his presents—which are here ;’ and she placed before him the pin-cushion and thimble, which had been Richard’s first gift to her as a child.

When discreet Mrs. Eldridge knocked at the drawing-room door, she found the young people on very good terms with one another.

‘What, Annie ! you here ?’ cried Dick.

‘Of course I am.’ She felt it hard her daughter should not have thought it worth while to mention the fact, notwithstanding

she had been so evidently otherwise engaged. 'You don't suppose I would have let Lucy live in London all alone, Master Richard.'

'Of course not; I had forgotten that. But you mustn't call me Master Richard any more. You used to be my foster-mother, Annie; but henceforth you will be my mother-in-law.'

'Lors, Master Richard, you take the very breath out of my body. What will folks say at Durnton?'

Lucy broke out into a laugh, so ringing, so cheerful, though it was not loud, that it sounded like Joy's self set to music.

'My dear mother is always thinking of public opinion—at Durnton,' she explained.

Then Dick laughed too, and very heartily, for he pictured to himself Mrs. Freeman's face when she should hear the news.

'I think I know what they will say, Annie. They will say they always predicted it. We shall confer a great pleasure on them by proving how sagacious they all were.'

Mrs. Eldridge sighed and shook her head. She was by no means of opinion that they would be pleased; nor was the good woman pleased herself at what had happened, notwithstanding that it had made her daughter so happy.

‘I hope it is all for the best,’ she said. ‘But Lucy was making her way in the world; and they do say, Master Richard—and I believe it’s true, for your money always burnt in your pockets ever since you wore ’em—that you are on the road to ruin.’

‘Mother, mother!’ exclaimed Lucy reprovingly.

‘You are quite right, Annie,’ said Richard; ‘but, with Lucy to help me, I mean henceforward to be a good boy.’

It was an honest speech, and had the simplicity of the boy to recommend it; but what was the value of such a promise? Was it a genuine guarantee of future improvement, or only an undertaking to be good—until next time?

Mrs. Eldridge had probably heard a good

deal more of Master Richard's goings on than he had any idea of. She smiled, of course, but it was a very dubious smile.

'Come, mother, Dick must not be taken to task to-day,' pleaded Lucy. 'We have been having a long talk together, and he assures me that he will henceforth give up his extravagant habits for my sake.'

'I will indeed,' assented Dick. 'Everything is right and jolly. And, look here, since the day is so fine, I'll have the drag out, and take you both to Richmond. We'll dine at the Star and——what's the matter, Annie?'

His mother-in-law to be, who was looking out of the window, had uttered an exclamation of terror.

'Matter!' cried the gamekeeper's widow, 'there's matter enough. Your aunt, Miss Talbot—all in her popish dress too, which shows she means mischief—has just got out of a cab.'



CHAPTER XIV.

AT DAGGERS DRAWN.

AT the thought of Sister Edith's propinquity the knees of two at least of the little company in Knyvett Place were 'loosened with dismay.'

The feelings of Richard and his foster-mother could, without much injustice, be compared with those of two rogues who, while dividing the communion-plate in a church vestry, suddenly perceive the clergyman coming up the aisle. It was not so bad of course as if it had been the policeman, but it was a catastrophe next akin to it. Sister Edith had no power, indeed, to forbid the banns or quench the torch of Cupid, but the affectionate respect that

Richard entertained for her carried a weight of authority with it which with him probably far exceeded that of the law. He remembered the great sacrifice she had made for him as respected his grandfather's will, and was by no means unconscious that throughout his life, until his own misconduct had placed him out of the pale of her ministrations, she had never ceased her endeavours to promote his welfare. Unexpected as was his aunt's appearance at Madam Lucinda's door, and unaccountable as were the means by which she had been led thither, the cause of her coming was evident enough, and gave him not alarm indeed, but genuine pain.

Mrs. Parkes, on the other hand, was well-nigh frightened out of her wits. Her awe of 'the family' (as she termed the Talbots, as though there was not such another race in the world) was extreme, and indeed formed one of her chief objections to her daughter's marriage with Richard ; and what she had vaguely heard, through village gossip, of Sister Edith

herself, made her more alarmed at that lady than she had been of the Squire himself. Her hereditary authority as a Talbot seemed to be supplemented by the powers of the Roman Catholic Church, and made her formidable in Mrs. Parkes' eyes beyond expression. Her advice to Dick upon the present occasion, had she ventured to give it, would have been to surrender at discretion, and accompany his aunt to afternoon service at St. Ethelburga's on the instant. As it was, she counselled an immediate flight of the whole party by the back-door, which communicated with the Kilburn road, and that the maid should be instructed to say that her mistress was in the country.

Lucy alone was resolute and self-possessed.

'Go upstairs, mother,' said she authoritatively, 'and take Richard with you. I will see Miss Talbot alone.'

Dick was by no means sorry to be spared the coming encounter, but his good instincts did not wholly desert him.

'Remember, Lucy, Aunt Edie has been

always kind to me ;' then added, after a moment's hesitation, 'and she has been more generous and self-sacrificing for my sake than you have the least idea of.'

'I will not forget it,' answered Lucy quietly, as she closed the door upon him ; then with one glance at the looking-glass—
analogous to that which the warrior casts upon his armour ere he meets the foe—she waited for the coming footfall.

The next moment Miss Talbot was announced. The two women had not met since that last interview in Ford's Alley, and in the meantime both had changed. Sister Edith had become a middle-aged woman ; her hair, which would still have been luxuriant had her simple disposition of it permitted it to appear so, was thickly sprinkled with grey ; her features were more sharply defined, and in their expression graver than of yore ; they had an ascetic cast. The sweetness of disposition which her gentle eyes were wont to betray, if not altogether absent, was shadowed by a severe purpose.

On the other hand, Lucy was scarcely recognisable as the simple and unfashioned girl, ignorant of the world, and indeed of everything save the strength of her own will and feelings, who had given up her all at the other's bidding. Stately, beautiful, and becomingly attired, she looked in every way the social superior of the figure in homely grey.

Sister Edith noted the change, and by no means approved of it. 'I am come here—Lucy—if I may still call you so' (she was not speaking in humility, as the other well understood; she meant 'if you are still worthy of that familiar name,') 'upon a most unpleasant errand—the same, however, on which I came to you once before.'

Lucy bent her head—if you can so call the deflection of half a quarter of an inch. They stood face to face, for Sister Edith had declined the chair her hostess had offered to her, nor had she taken her hand.

'It is a day on which I do not usually

make visits. I had intended to have called to-morrow, but circumstances have compelled me to come at once.'

Mr. Greene had sent this note to Gresham Street, by hand: 'Just called on Dick; he is off, I believe, to Knyvett Place; not a moment is to be lost.'

'They are very grave circumstances. I hear that my nephew Richard intends to renew his engagement with you—that he even meditates coming here to-day.'

'He is here at this moment, madam. It is his cab you found at the door.'

The news was bad enough, but the coolness with which it was communicated seemed to Sister Edith even more reprehensible. The very look of Knyvett Place had shocked her; she had been well accustomed to the haunts of ignorance and crime, but those of fashionable vice and folly were unknown to her; from what she had heard of them, however, Knyvett Place (inhabited by five city clerks, an architect, an inspector of nuisances, and poor Lucy) had appeared to her a sink of

iniquity. And here was one of its indwellers, a flaunting, brazen woman, whose profession was the stage, and whose practice probably much worse than her profession.

‘Here! under this roof! And you have the face to tell me so.’

‘I do not understand you, madam,’ was Lucy’s cold reply.

The other’s tone had frozen her.

‘You told me, the last time I spoke to you on this subject,’ said Sister Edith, somewhat less harshly (for she at once perceived the ill effects of her virtuous indignation), ‘that you had done with Richard for ever; that you would not encourage him by word or deed.’

‘Nor have I done so.’

‘And yet he is now here.’

‘I did not promise, if he came to me unasked, that I would refuse to see him. Since you affect authority over him, why not address your arguments to him? Why come to me, who owe you no obedience?’

‘Because you have entangled—I mean,

because you have obtained an influence over him which I cannot combat.'

Lucy smiled—a smile of which she took no pains to conceal the triumph.

'And yet I have not spoken to him, madam, save this morning, for four years.'

'Then it is infatuation!' exclaimed Edith mechanically. 'You ask me why I come to you; it is because I hoped, in spite of what I heard and what I feared, that there might be some good and generous instincts left in you, such as you once possessed. I am not here to judge you or reproach you. Years ago you acknowledged by your own act that you were not a fitting bride for Richard Talbot; can you venture to tell me that as his wife you will less disgrace him now?'

'Madam, I have borne enough,' returned Lucy haughtily. 'Nay,' for the other had begun some halting sentence of apology or conciliation. 'I do not refer to your insulting and unseemly words, but to the past—*my* past. I have borne enough for the sake of you and yours, which at that

time I thought was for the sake of Richard. To you, Miss Talbot, it may seem presumptuous to say I love him ; yet if you have really sunk all thoughts of birth and rank in your spiritual calling, that fact should be intelligible to you.'

A faint blush came into Sister Edith's face ; 'I fail,' she said, 'to catch your meaning.'

'Then I must speak more plainly. It seems to me, madam, that you, being vowed to I know not what—the Church or Heaven—have forgotten, or perhaps have never known, what it is to love. It is not so with a poor creature like myself.'

'A sinful creature,' murmured the other, accompanied, however, with a glance of pity.

'Yes, as compared with you, no doubt. Though, madam, let me tell you that no disgrace, such as you are thinking of, attaches to me. I am a woman, pure as yourself, if not so saintly.'

'Thank Heaven for that at least,' said Edith naïvely. 'But if this is so, Lucy—

and I do believe it—if you have resisted evil in perilous paths, there must be much of good and right in you, and pity for those who are on their way to ruin. Pity Richard, then. Do not, by allying yourself with him, destroy what regard is still entertained for him by others. He is wedded to evil courses ; his habits of excess have become second nature with him ; he will one day want bread. In a worldly point of view, the position of her who may become his wife will be far from enviable. I do not, however, argue with you on that ground.’

‘Miss Talbot,’ answered Lucy coldly, ‘you may argue how you please ; any stick is good enough to beat a dog with. But this time your logic will not avail you. You speak of “pity ;” well, I have pity, I hope, but it includes some pity for myself this time. You are good enough to warn me on my own account against marrying your nephew. I thank you, but must decline your advice. I know very well what I am about to do. I have heard it said of him—and you have just now hinted the

same thing—that those who would counsel him might as well talk to the winds. In this matter his case is mine ; all argument, all remonstrance, with me is unavailing, for a reason you do not understand—I love him.’

‘You are right,’ said Sister Edith coldly ; ‘I do not understand the nature of that love which would harm its object. You will be Richard’s ruin.’

‘Nay, madam, you have already said he will be ruined in any case. He will now be ruined in company instead of alone, which is always a consolation.’

‘You are a reckless woman, Lucy, and though you flatter yourself otherwise, I fear, a heartless one,’ said Sister Edith sternly. ‘Your words, though you do not know it, are the promptings of Satan.’

Lucy laughed aloud—not the laugh of an hour ago, but one of cynical bitterness.

‘There is one object, madam, with which—inferior as I am to you in all other branches of knowledge—I must claim to be better acquainted than yourself. An

actress, you see, is a child of Satan ; and I am positively certain he is not now prompting me.'

'Graceless girl, apt pupil of your godless step-father, I have done with you !' cried Sister Edith.

Lucy turned white as the dainty collar about her throat.

'Then go !' she said, and pointed to the door.

The battle was over, and she had conquered ; but when the door had closed upon the retreating foe, her face showed no sign of triumph. She sank into her chair, and burst into tears. They had been near her eyes, though never visible, half a dozen times during that interview.

'God help him ! God help him !' she murmured.

Sister Edith, with her hands crossed upon her bosom, was at the same moment uttering the self-same prayer.

'Well, Lucy, what has happened ?' asked Richard, coming softly into the room. 'Your mother has been half dead with fear.'

‘What was there to be afraid of, my dear Dick? Of course, it was an unpleasant scene, but you see I have got over it.’

‘I hope you were not hard upon Aunt Edie, darling.’

‘Not I. I was obliged, however, to tell her the truth.—He does not ask,’ thought Lucy bitterly, ‘was she hard on *me*?’

‘Quite right. But you’ve been crying, my sweet.’

‘No, I haven’t; my eyes are a little weak this morning; some fresh air will do me good. You were talking of taking us to Richmond.’

‘And so I will. Do you prefer a carriage and two posters, or the drag?’

‘Oh, the drag; I love four horses. I wish it was the custom to drive six.’

‘That is just my view, my darling. How admirably our tastes agree. We shall be the happiest married couple in all London.’



CHAPTER XV.

A PERFECT PARADISE.

IT has become very difficult, even for people of condition, to make a stir in the world of London. The commission of a murder goes no way at all, unless the attempts at subsequent concealment are of an original character; bigamy is an everyday affair, and has, besides, become so exclusively 'literary property,' that the newspapers pass it over, and by tacit consent leave the subject to be dealt with by the novelists. Unless a new crime should be invented, the laurel of notoriety is scarcely within the reach of anybody.

The engagement, therefore, of Richard Talbot, of the Tower, Durnton, to Madam

Lucinda, late of the Mirabel Theatre, Hoxton, attracted but little public attention. Still, as the young couple were both widely known, though in very different circles, it did furnish a topic of conversation. The men expressed their opinion that he might have done worse ; and the women drew themselves up and replied, ' Good gracious ! how ?'

Old Walter Pole acknowledged that his prophecy at Francis Talbot's funeral had failed of its fulfilment. ' I said he would marry the wench in six months, and he has taken four years about it.'

Everybody else about Durnton had ' foreseen the thing from the first,' and expected no better than what had happened. As a subject to talk about, it was, of course, a godsend to the neighbourhood, and put the nose out of joint of the crops, the game prospects, and the county elections. The Rector and his wife alone were reticent upon the matter. The former remembered that Dick was still the squire of the parish, as well as the son of his old friend ; the

latter could not forget that Lucy Lindon would presently be the mistress of the Tower, and a branch (though grafted on to it in a very unsatisfactory manner) of the genealogical tree. Mrs. Freeman had responsibilities which her neighbours had not, and, besides, had some common sense of her own. She looked forward to a time when the present indignation should have passed away, and things should have found their level. Would it be well, then, that she and Mrs. Richard Talbot should be at daggers drawn? She knew enough of that young lady's character to feel she must make her choice of peace or war at once, for that there would be no subsequent loop-hole of escape if she chose war.

The Rector was dreadfully alarmed lest Richard should have asked him to come up to town to perform the marriage ceremony, which, fortunately, he did not. The idea never entered into the young man's head. He was married in Kilburn Church by the vicar of the parish, and there were present on the occasion, besides the bride and bride-

groom, just three persons—Mr. Leonard Greene, Mrs. Parkes, and—Lady Earnshaw.

The last-named had written her grandson this characteristic note :

‘ DEAR DICK,

‘ Let me know when and where you are going to be married, as I mean to be there.

‘ Yours affectionately,

‘ CATHERINE EARNSHAW.’

And of course the information had been given to her.

Perhaps Sister Edith was not sorry that her aunt took this step, but she could not bring herself to countenance the affair by her own presence.

‘ Such a marriage,’ she averred, ‘ cannot but end ill.’

‘ Very likely, my dear,’ the old lady had replied ; ‘ but at all events we should give the young people as good a start as possible. There shall be at least one person

at Dick's wedding to represent the family. You tell me that you believe the young woman is respectable, which is unusual in such cases, and therefore I shall give her my countenance, and a marriage present. I have known a duke and two peers in my time who have married play-actresses, and their wives did not make them worse than they were before.'

As to arguing with her ladyship when she had once made up her mind on a matter, nobody who knew her ever attempted it. She even attended the bridal breakfast in Knyvett Place.

Sister Edith, who was a woman still, in spite of everything, was consumed with curiosity to know how matters had 'gone off'; and as her aunt would not volunteer a syllable of information, she was compelled to ask for it.

'I thought you felt the whole matter too shocking to be talked about,' replied the old lady. 'Dick looked very nice, and the young lady charming—quite beautiful

enough, my dear, to excuse any man for doing anything.'

'She must have been very grateful to you for your presence?'

'She expressed herself, my dear, to that effect, and, I am bound to say, with great propriety.'

When Lady Earnshaw said, 'I am bound to say,' she always meant, 'I am very happy to say;' so Edith knew that Lucy had made a favourable impression. She did not grudge it her, we may be sure.

'Had you any private talk with—
Lucy?'

'A few words, my dear, which being, as you say, private, I am not at liberty to repeat. My impression is the girl means well. She will do her best for Richard, until she finds it is no use, which I fear will be very soon. I have seen so many cases like poor Dick's.'

Lady Earnshaw spoke truth. She might have added that she had had a very near experience of them. It was lucky for her that her husband was only alive (if, indeed,

he still was so) to her own morbid fancy. Had he not been at the bottom of the sea, he would probably have long ago been in the depths of ruin, and she with him. It was curious that, though she had not lost faith in him, she had lost faith in others through his example.

‘Then even you think their case is hopeless,’ said Sister Edith, ‘though you went to the wedding?’

‘Everybody likes to come out of matters with clean hands, my dear; but they have different ways of doing it. The good people (to whom I don’t belong, you know) accomplish it by washing their hands of all their unsatisfactory relations. That is not my way. Give me a cup of tea, my dear.’

It was clear that Lucy had one very unexpected ally.

Mr. Leonard Greene, too, could be thoroughly relied on by the young couple. He had opposed the match, as we have seen, and yet had been Richard’s best (and only) man at the wedding. He was of opinion not only that it is of no use to cry

over spilt milk, but that it is our duty to efface the traces of the catastrophe as best we can. At the same time, this was by no means his view of moral crimes. He was forgiving in the case of personal injuries—though he could never stand a slight—but he was adamant to scoundrels. He would not speak to some men (notwithstanding they were very well received in society), because, it might be, of one base action they had committed. He held that to commit a baseness a man must be base. When remonstrated with for his want of charity, he would say he pretended to no such virtue. When reminded that it might be the delinquent's first offence, he would answer, 'Then he must be very unlucky to have been discovered so early. I can't afford to know unlucky people.' It would have surprised and even alarmed him to have been told that he was a man of principle; but even among the Bohemians, with whom he chiefly consorted, his opinion had a certain weight. And it was good for the young couple to have Leonard Greene

upon their side. He was a fighting man ; he did not belong to the mere transport corps of one's acquaintance, and certainly not to the chaplains. When a friend was decried in his presence, he was not content with 'deploring' his weaknesses, but defended him and them with sharp and shining steel.

But except for her ladyship and Mr. Greene, the young couple had the world against them.

Lucy, indeed, might have kept her own friends, had she thought proper ; kind-hearted folks in their way some of them were, whom it gave her a pang to part with ; but, for her husband's sake, she resolved to withdraw herself from all her 'Mirabel' acquaintances. If his friends and relatives chose to be ashamed of the woman he had chosen for his wife, they should at least have no excuse for it in her conduct. She might have kept them all, and welcome, so far as Dick was concerned ; but she knew what was best for him. The idea that Lucy had in her mind,

and of which, touched by that lady's kindness, she had dropped a hint to Lady Earnshaw, was that she should hold her husband in bonds that he should not feel, and keep him straight without his knowing it. He was to have his way in everything, but not all his way. She counted much on Richard's genuine devotion to her, and resolved to turn it all to his own use and benefit. The question was whether she, or any human power, could rescue him from those extravagant and wasteful courses which had become the habit of his life. Dick was not ostentatious—but that was the only form of prodigality in which he did not indulge; he would have lit a cigar with a five-pound-note rather than trouble himself to reach a spill from the mantelpiece.

It was not from mere sentiment therefore, or appreciation of the beauties of nature, that Lucy elected to spend the honeymoon in the Isle of Wight instead of Paris. Dick had proposed Paris because he thought it would please Lucy,

but he bowed to her choice at once, as he would have done if it had been Gravesend. He felt that he should be in heaven anywhere so long as he was with his bride ; nor was he mistaken ; only, perhaps, it did not strike him that one's wife would not be one's bride for ever.

Of course an hotel—at Ventnor or elsewhere—was not to be thought of ; he hired a ' perfect paradise,' as the advertisement called it, at the back of the island, which was not to be let for less than three months, but which one might have for one month if one paid the rent for three. A wood shaded it from the sun ; a garden aglow with flowers, sloped down from it to the sea. Lucy thought she had never seen anything so beautiful, even on a drop-scene.

' Oh, Richard, how happy I am !' she was constantly saying, to which he would reply, ' Of course, you are, my love ; all angels are happy.'

At the end of two days, however, as they were sitting on the lawn together, she heard him sigh.

'My darling Dick, what is the matter?'

'Nothing, dearest; I was only thinking what a pity it is that Goodwood is over—one could have run down there from this place so easily.'

The idea of his wishing to exchange the 'perfect paradise' for a racecourse was a grievous blow to her; but she was far too wise to reproach him. His occupation had been the pursuit of pleasure, and it was natural he should suffer *ennui* now that it was intermitted: just as a barrister in full practice feels bored in the long vacation. The difficulty was to provide him with wholesome amusements to take the place of the old ones.

After much thought upon the matter, Lucy resolved to affect a desire to go to Durnton; it was the beginning of the shooting season, so Richard would find something to do there; after the partridges would come the pheasants, and after the pheasants the foxhounds, so that his time would be accounted for till the spring; and by that time—who could tell?—it was pos-

sible that he might have struck root in the old place, and be content to dwell there among old friends and neighbours.

It was the safest scheme she could hit upon if it could but be accomplished, and therefore she began at once to advocate it, though, so far as she was concerned, it held forth small attractions indeed.

Mrs. Richard Talbot quite understood what sort of reception she was personally likely to meet with from her Durnton neighbours; as the ex-actress who had 'hooked' the young master of the Tower, she was prepared for cold shoulders; but what would make her position still more difficult was the companionship of her mother. It was possible that for her husband's sake, or for their own, she might herself be 'called upon' by the neighbourhood, and a certain sort of intimacy be established; but it was not to be hoped for that the neighbourhood would have anything (of a polite nature) to say to Mrs. Parkes, the widow of the late Squire's gamekeeper, who would have been transported for burglary

with violence had he not had the good fortune to be drowned. And yet to part with her mother was a terrible trial. For though to the common eye that good lady might not be strong-minded, nor distinguished for her conversational powers, nor for the elegance of her personal appearance, to Lucy she was very dear, and deservedly so. This good woman had cast in her own lot with Lucy's—though very far from hopeful of the result—and in spite of all the remonstrances of Aunt Susan, had stood by her, when she had taken her wilful way stage-wards. Her companionship, her countenance, had been everything to her daughter, as the latter was well aware : she had never murmured at the inconveniences to which she had been subjected in a mode of life especially unsuited to her homely disposition ; she had watched and waited on her with a patience and fidelity no money could have purchased ; she had been her comfort in days of dependency, and her safeguard in times of temptation ; and with a heart of wax, so far as its tenderness was concerned,

and its capability of being moulded to her wishes, she had been ever as leal and true to her as steel. At present she was 'keeping house' in Knyvett Place, but could Lucy always leave her there alone? Would a due supply of food and raiment and lodging be a meet return to such a mother for years of self-sacrifice and devotion? On the other hand, if she was to live with the young couple, the Durnton scheme would have to be given up.

In this dilemma Richard himself unconsciously came to the rescue. Mention having been casually made of Susan Parkes, in the course of which Lucy gratefully acknowledged the obligations she had been at all times under to her aunt—she was thinking doubtless more especially of the little woman's generous, though ineffectual attempt to take her place at the Music Hall—Dick immediately proposed that something should be done for her. An opportunity had arisen—and this time a creditable one—to indulge his fancy for spending money; and he at once declared that this

excellent person should be made independent if possible.

‘I don’t think Aunt Susan would take your money, darling,’ said Lucy thoughtfully; ‘but, perhaps—if we managed it discreetly—we could induce her to live with mother. I could not let mother be quite alone in the world, Dick.’

‘Of course not; I thought she was to live with us,’ returned the bridegroom naïvely.

Lucy devoured him with her loving eyes; it did not occur to her that neither the social difficulty nor the terrors of a resident mother-in-law had ever so much as entered his head; she only perceived his generosity and willingness to please her in all things.

‘That would scarcely do, darling; if we go to Durnton everybody would look down on poor mother there.’

‘Then don’t let us go to Durnton’ (it was thus he proposed to dismiss a scheme of which she had been urging the propriety with great tact and skill, for days): ‘let us go to Brighton or Paris.’

'No, Dick, we must go to Durnton. I have set my heart on that.'

'Then mine must be set on it too, darling, since we have but one heart between us,' was the bridegroom's reply.

So when their month was up, the still happy pair exchanged the 'perfect paradise' for Durnton.



CHAPTER XVI.

LUCY AT DURNTON.

To the common view, the benefactors of the human race are but of two kinds : (1) benevolent persons who give their money to hospitals and other charitable institutions, and (2) scientific persons who root out diseases like Jenner, or dull pain like Simpson. But the individual who provides conversation on a large scale, and of an exciting description, for the unfortunates who live in the country, and are at their wits' end for a topic, has surely no slight claim to rank in the same category. For the Squire of the parish, and the representative of a long line of ancestors who have never attempted any such public benefaction, to

marry an actress and bring her down with him, after his honeymoon, to his country seat, is, it must be admitted, a blessing to all his neighbours ; but the misfortune is that they often look on it as a mere god-send—a boon for which they have to thank the general course of events, and not the particular person to whom they are indebted for it. On the contrary, they are disposed to resent his conduct while enjoying the fruits of it—every description of gossip, scandal, and tittle-tattle—to their heart's content.

Thus it happened with Richard Talbot when he brought home his bride to Durnton Tower.

Their names, especially hers, were upon every tongue. Old gentlemen, given to apoplexy, grew purple as they coughed and chuckled over them ; old ladies, who in public frowned and threw their heads up like impatient steeds at the mention of them, in private winked, blinked, and giggled over them in appreciative disapprobation. The young gentlemen looked

forward to flirtations with Dick's fair enslaver, of a kind unheard of in their county practice ; the young ladies were dying to see this abominable and designing creature, but would die sooner than be introduced to her upon equal terms. It was carried *nem. con.* by all who represented 'society' in the neighbourhood that the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Talbot among them was to be ignored ; and if circumstances should necessitate more stringent measures, even that they should be cut.

Unconscious of this arming of the population against them, the young couple came down to Durnton and established themselves at the Tower. Mr. and Mrs. Freeman, as in duty bound, called on them the following day. The interview was an embarrassing one ; for the Rector's wife, though she made no allusion to the change in their relative positions, could not forbear a certain air of patronage, which tried her hostess's powers of patience to the utmost ; and, moreover, the two women had not a thought in common. However, Lucy so

acquitted herself that Mrs. Freeman afterwards acknowledged that there was 'nothing flagrant' in her manner.

On this, the Rector was encouraged to remark that really Richard might have done worse—a point that could scarcely be conceded.

'Worse!' replied she, with asperity. 'Well, yes, he might have married a Papist.'

Mr. Lucker, the mellifluous, paid his respects the next afternoon; and these three comprised the whole of the young couple's visiting list.

At first this isolation did not make itself felt: the 'happy pair' were well content with each other's company, and the return to their native village afforded food for thought and talk to both of them. Lucy could not help contrasting, not without some feeling of triumph, her position as mistress of the Tower, with what it had been when she had last left Durnton; but her nature was not of that complacent kind that can sustain itself on self-congratulation.

She soon understood that everybody else had this same contrast in their minds, and that they resented it. If she had had her own feelings only to consult, she would have left the Tower, shaking the Durnton dust from her feet, within a month of her arrival there, and never to return to it again. Had she put away from her her own mother to conciliate these heartless aristocrats, only to receive from them contempt and cold neglect? If they despised her, she also despised and hated them from the very bottom of her heart. But then there was Richard. If he was but content—if life could by any means be made agreeable to him at Durnton—she would bear all without complaint. But the cup she had to drink was a very bitter one. It is among the things not generally known that people who have neither rank, nor money, to plume themselves upon may still possess a proud spirit. Nature sometimes puts things ridiculously out of place, and she had made Lucy both proud and sensitive.

Men came to the Tower for weeks at a

time for the shooting, but they did not bring their womankind; and when they asked Richard to shoot with them in return, their invitations, even when they had wives of their own, did not include his wife.

At first Richard refused to go. He 'damned their impudence.' To Lucy's entreaties that he should accept their hospitality, he answered, 'If you are good enough for me, my dear—and you are ten times too good for me—you are good enough for them; you are worth all their wives and daughters put together.'

She was well pleased at his indignation upon her account, but she still pressed his going, and in the end he acceded to her wishes. It would never do for him, she knew, to be cooped up with her in the Tower, without companions.

Richard was willing to have as much good shooting as he could get, but he was still very leal to her.

At the Manor, to which he was invited by Henry Pole, his grandfather being ill

and broken by this time, and no longer equal to playing the part of host, Richard spoke to Margaret Pole quite frankly about his wife.

‘You used to be an honest, kind-hearted girl,’ he said, ‘and we are old friends, Madge. Why do you join these hateful women in their cabal against my Lucy?’

And he told her how good and true she was, and with what unselfishness she had behaved.

Miss Pole was greatly moved.

‘I am not mistress here,’ she said (Miss Latour still ruled); ‘and besides, I am a coward. I did not dare to set my own opinion (which was on your side) against that of everybody else. But now I will call on your wife. I perceive it is my duty.’

Margaret had grown very grave and serious; her grandfather had complained of late that religion had got hold of her, and he was not yet at such a pass to regard with patience anything of that kind. Her brother defended her: he acknowledged that she was not the girl she was,

but thought 'if they could only get her married she would be all right.' This was difficult in Margaret's case, who was in a high social position, but without a shilling for certain to call her own. No one quite knew what might have been the full extent of the old gentleman's extravagance—whether he might leave a few thousands or only mortgages.

Strange to say, the girl clung to her grandfather rather than to her brother, and tended him with affectionate solicitude.

Her promise to visit Lucy gave Richard great satisfaction, and it would no doubt have been performed but for a domestic calamity. Old Walter Pole had a paralytic seizure, which sent the shooting-party to their homes, and Richard among them, and made Margaret a close prisoner. This was a great misfortune, for, notwithstanding much cynical talk to the contrary, a true woman needs some companion of her own sex. Lucy passed many a weary hour, solitary and sad, though she never let Richard read it in her face; indeed,

when he returned to her she was no longer sad, and he was not one to picture to himself a condition of affairs that did not present itself to his outward eye.

One visitor occasionally came to the Tower, who, for gentleness, sympathy, and, I must add, in his gross ignorance of the sports of the field, was almost a woman. This was Leonard Greene. When the other guests, gun in hand, were brushing the dew from the turnip-tops, or struggling through the copses, or while they urged their wild career after 'the red dog with the bushy tail,' Mr. Greene stayed within doors with the lady of the house ; wherefrom sprang a great deal of scandal. For the very ladies who had outlawed Lucy, and cut her off from the society of her sex, were prompt to seize upon this companionship as a proof of their own good judgment. It was very lucky that they had shown no such weakness towards her, as some—though, to say the truth, Miss Pole had been the only one—from mistaken charity, would have suggested. This unhappy

young person was carrying on a disgraceful flirtation under her own roof, and within six months of her marriage ; but what better could be expected of her, considering her relatives and antecedents ?

Of course, they wronged her, and Mr. Greene also. He was, above all things, a gentleman—not of ‘the man of honour’ kind—and the idea with which these excellent people credited him had never so much as entered his head. He admired Lucy, but at least as much for her pluck and independence as for her beauty ; and he liked her best of all because, in his judgment—and with respect to men and women at least it was no mean one—she was so good a wife to Richard. She never told him of her fears for her husband, but he understood them, as well as the efforts, undemonstrative and subtle though they were, which she made to win him from his wild courses, and to teach him to find his happiness in home. And they touched him all the more because he knew that they were in vain.

A man need not go to Newmarket to bet, any more than he need go to the city to speculate ; and Richard, though he had ceased to attend racecourses, made up his little book as usual, and lost his thousands by it. Did she know this, Greene wondered, or did she not ?

At last the matter was put beyond a doubt.

On a certain Sunday, when they had all been to church together—for the young Squire attended morning service in the most exemplary manner—the Rector, walking home with them, ventured, notwithstanding his wife's presence, to congratulate Mrs. Talbot upon her fine voice.

'You are quite an acquisition to our village choir,' he had said.

'I am used to singing in church,' said Lucy simply. 'You know I used to sing at St. Ethelbúrga's,' whereat Mrs. Freeman sniffed disapprobation. She could have hardly felt more shocked if Lucy had referred to her stage experiences.

Mr. Greene, when turning over the

leaves of Lucy's music for her that evening, as usual, referred to this conversation, and *à propos* of it, remarked how diligent she was—and not without favourable results—in the cultivation of her voice.

‘It may be of use to me some day,’ she said, smiling. ‘When bank-notes are all gone and spent, these notes may be most excellent.’

She spoke in jest, but her companion felt from that moment that Lucy feared the worst consequences from her husband's extravagance, and was preparing, in this humble fashion, for the day of adversity. He judged rightly ; but there was a reason, known only to Lucy herself, that was now prompting her more than ever to make provision for the future.



CHAPTER XVII.

GOOD ADVICE, AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

WHEN the shooting and hunting were over was the crucial time as regarded Richard's content with country life; for though it is possible for an idle man without a love for books, and who is no sportsman, to rusticate without *ennui*, it requires a certain indolence of disposition; and moreover that he should either never have devoted himself to the pursuit of pleasure, or else have been sickened of it. And the case of Richard did not fulfil these conditions. It so happened, however, that the lease of one of his largest farms had fallen in, and as the tenant was not desirous to renew, Richard took it into his own hands. In this novel

occupation he took a quite unlooked-for interest, and had the occurrence happened earlier, there is no saying but that his lines of life might have taken a wholly different direction; but his father before him had had, as we know, no turn for agricultural pursuits, and had never dreamt of any taste for them lying dormant in his son. Richard, wholly inexperienced, and difficult to be advised (unless a certain subtlety was employed, not usually to be found in farm bailiffs) did not find himself in a favourable position for prosecuting this new pursuit to a profit; but the loss was nothing in his case as compared with the gain of an occupation that attracted him, which, strange to say, he found.

There was a certain simplicity in Dick's character, underlying all his wild ways, which now seemed to have discovered a natural channel of action. He rose with the lark (instead, as before, of retiring to rest about that period) and went to bed at a wholesome hour. He passed his days on horseback or on foot in his fields; he

bought at a high price and sold at a low one ; and gave every promise of becoming a gentleman-farmer with results only slightly more disastrous than usual. He had plenty of method (which, indeed, he flattered himself was his strong point), but it was not of the right sort ; experience was wanting to him, and he purchased it—like everything else he wanted—dearly. But to the loving eyes that were looking further for him than into his yearly balance-sheet the experiment was answering admirably, when a misfortune occurred that crushed the budding hope.

Lucy herself was taken ill.

The fact of playing so long to a very unappreciative audience, had tried her nerves in many ways ; even Richard's love, which, to do him justice, never flagged, was in sufficient to support her under such adverse circumstances, and indeed was in itself a source of weakness, since but for it her devotion to him might have been less, as also the fears she entertained upon his account. It is a true saying that it is not

work but worry which kills men, and the same holds good as regards women. She could have done anything, dared anything, for her husband's sake ; but the feverish apprehension of his coming ruin, though it did not palsy her energies, consumed her strength. And her strength was not now what it had been. She bore about with her another life, the existence of which was already an anxiety to her. Hitherto she had had to face the future only as regarded Richard himself : but she had now to consider—to make provision for—the future of Richard's child. In her own mind she was convinced that the babe with which Heaven was about to bless her, as other wives would have termed it, would be born to an inheritance of ruin. To Lucy, the game-keeper's step-daughter, the prospect of poverty for her child may seem to some to have had nothing abnormal or alarming about it ; but her love for her husband had so transformed her, that she beheld life, as it were, through his eyes—the eyes, alas, he would not himself use aright ; and felt

keenly for him the humiliation and disgrace to which he himself was comparatively indifferent. It was Leonard Greene's opinion, and he knew his friend well, that Richard would never become alive to the peril of his position till it was too late ; that he would never cease, in short, to squander his money till he had not a shilling left to spend.

The loss on his farm was a mere fleabite as compared with his other channels of expenditure ; for ' of the making of books,' says the preacher, ' there is no end,' and this is especially true in the case of those who make betting-books.

Though he never confessed to it, save by a playful reference to ' his having come rather a cropper over the Biennial,' or his ' not having found Epsom quite such a good thing as he had expected,' Lucy was convinced that her husband was pursuing the same road to ruin on which he had started long before their marriage ; and that all her efforts to save him were labour in vain. Most of us have been acquainted

with cases where the poor wife tries to stop the huge gap of her husband's extravagances with little economies here and there, which would be ridiculous in their inefficacy but for the motive that prompts them ; but Lucy had made use of no such endeavours, for she had felt their futility from the first. She had tried a better way ; she had attempted a revolution in her husband's habits—and she had failed.

If Mr. Lucker had had ten times the skill with which the county credited him, he would have been unable to lay his finger on what was amiss with the mistress of the Tower, because he was unaware of these facts. He only knew that her constitution had suddenly broken down. It was an unusual thing to happen to one in her condition, and a very grave one. There were certain indications in connection with the brain which alarmed him, and after a week of continuous attendance, and in the face of Richard's feverish anxiety, he shrunk from the responsibility that devolved upon him, and advised 'another opinion.'

The same doctor who had been sent for to Richard's father came down from town, and on this occasion so far differed from his *confrère* as to alter the patient's treatment.

His prescription was, 'Let her mother be sent for.'

Richard trembled as he heard it, thinking what this man's *fiat* had been in his father's case, and how the fact had confirmed it. But the physician bade him be of good courage. 'Your wife is in no danger of her life,' he said; 'she requires change, and, above all, such companionship as a mother alone can give.'

Richard would have telegraphed for his foster-mother on the instant, but Lucy resolutely opposed this step. 'My mother cannot come here,' was her quiet but firm assertion.

Richard understood her at once, and mentally consigned the whole 'neighbourhood' to a warmer and less watery climate than that of Norfolk.

'Then you must go to *her*, Lucy,' he said.

She resisted even this alternative, but it was now Richard's turn to be resolute.

'If you will not go,' he answered, 'she shall come and fetch you.'

And in the end (as always) he had his way.

'After all,' as Lucy said to herself, 'what does it matter, even though we do go to London? My poor Dick will gamble wherever he is.'

And the doctor had judged rightly, so far as he could judge in the dark; for she really did pine for her mother's company.

So Richard ran up to town and took for his wife, what the advertisement called a 'bijou residence' in one of the streets out of Park Lane. It was well furnished, but that 'of course' was not sufficient for its new tenant (male). He spent a thousand pounds or so in fitting it up as he thought Lucy would like it; and to this gilded cage carried his sick bird to be folded under the maternal wing.

The change seemed to afford her immediate benefit; and to all superficial

observers (among whom her husband himself was to be reckoned) had, with her health, recovered her spirits. Leonard Greene, however, who knew the cause of her anxieties, was not deceived ; and when in due time his friend made some laughing mention to him of the approaching arrival of an heir to the house of Talbot, he uttered the words which had long been on the tip of his tongue.

‘ I do hope, Talbot,’ said he, in that light way with which even his most serious thoughts were always clothed, ‘ that this prodigy will have something to inherit besides his parents’ virtues.’

‘ Inherit ? Well, he won’t be rich, you know ; I am afraid I have kicked down a farm or two’ (a Gargantuan expression for the sale of land). ‘ But then I have often heard you say that it was a misfortune for a young fellow to have too much money.’

‘ It is worse, however, for him to have none,’ observed the other dryly. ‘ Bad for a boy, and much worse for a delicate woman like Mrs. Talbot.’

‘We are not beggars yet, my dear fellow,’ answered Richard carelessly, but with a blush that betrayed even more than the succeeding sentence. ‘I have been extravagant, no doubt ; but what helps to keep me short is a certain charge upon the estate, which is a family secret.’

This news astonished Mr. Greene, and he looked grave enough—not because of the secret, however, but because of Richard’s reference to his being already ‘short,’ which he rightly judged could not have occurred to one in his position unless things had gone very, very far indeed.

‘Of course, it is not my business, old fellow, and I know I am pressing the privilege of an old friend to its extreme limit ; but I would remind you that you are not now alone in the world. You have sometimes admonished me concerning my free-thinking opinions, but you know it is stated in the Bible that a man who does not make provision for his wife and children is “worse than an infidel.” The text has reference, it is supposed, to a marriage settlement.’

‘You don’t say so!’ said Dick simply. ‘Well, I have made no settlement; Lucy would not hear of such a thing.’

‘You can make one without her hearing of it, Talbot.’

‘True; I’ll think about it. There is a pair of horses to be sold at Tattersall’s this morning, if you will drive round with me—but there, you don’t know a horse from a handsaw;’ and off he walked, a little out of humour.

‘I know an ass when I see him,’ sighed Mr. Greene to himself; for he knew the value of Dick’s ‘I’ll think about it.’

It was creditable in Leonard Greene to venture upon any subject that was distasteful to another, because it was always twice as distasteful to himself. But this rebuff did not prevent him from recurring to the matter; only this time he made his appeal elsewhere—to Lucy herself.

Her position, so brilliant as it looked, so pitiful as it was—her bright smile, with the heavy care behind it, had touched his heart, and he was resolved to save her from the

coming ruin if it should be possible. Some fresh act of extravagance on her husband's part, for which he had not long to wait, gave him the desired opportunity, and he seized it.

'Dick will never be old,' he said, 'if he lives to be a thousand.'

'No. He wears the yoke of matrimony as if it were a flower,' answered Lucy gaily. 'No one can accuse me of having crushed him.'

'The yoke is light to bear in his case, Mrs. Talbot; but I wish he would think a little more of his responsibilities.'

Lucy's face darkened.

'I have nothing to complain of in my husband, Mr. Greene.'

'Of course not; it is I who complain of him, as the friend of both of you. Pray don't be angry with me. It is no fault of his, only there has been a certain omission in his arrangements for the future that I would venture to speak about; and the more so because I know it has not struck you. May I say one word on a mere matter of business?'

‘Business ? I am the last person in the world, my dear Mr. Greene, to understand such a thing.’

‘True ; but the very first who ought to understand it. One word from you to your husband would, I am sure, set right a matter that concerns you most nearly, and which is very, very far from right at present.’

Lucy’s face was paler than it had been in days of yore, and it now grew paler yet.

‘I am sure that whatever you may have to say will be dictated by kindness, Mr. Greene,’ she said—‘I found that out quite early, when I brought you out at the Imperial ; but I cannot hear anything that imputes blame to my husband.’

‘Not blame, dear Mrs. Talbot ; he has only made a mistake, which the expression of a wish on your part would cause him to rectify. He has made no marriage settlement.’

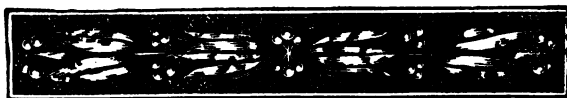
‘He did right,’ she said coldly ; ‘I brought him nothing, and I could accept of nothing.’

‘You are speaking of the past,’ he said ;
‘I am looking to the future.’

‘And I also, Mr. Greene. I look at nothing else.’ Her voice trembled a little as she said these words, but grew firm again as she added, ‘I thank you from my heart for your good intentions, but the matter to which you refer is one on which I alone can be the judge.’

Her tone precluded the possibility of further discussion, and after a few commonplaces Mr. Greene took his leave. His reflections were identical with those awakened by his late interview with Richard, only no man, even to himself, ever calls a pretty woman an ass.

‘This is midsummer madness,’ was his thought on this occasion ; ‘to a false and absurd sense of obligation to her husband she is about to sacrifice herself and her unborn babe ; the poor soul thinks she can support all three by her singing !’



CHAPTER XVIII.

A CATASTROPHE.

IT is difficult, very difficult, to find a test that shall be indisputable of a good husband. A man may be very 'domestic,' and all the worse for it ; or 'devoted,' and yet desperately jealous ; he may be kind and indulgent, and yet careless of his wife's health, or how he taxes it ; or he may be a 'model husband,' whose attractions are often found too great to be resisted by his neighbour's spouse. There is nothing certain to be gathered of the real merits of a Benedict from this or that attribute ; but perhaps the best test (if test there be) is to watch his behaviour during that cheerless time when his wife is engaged in the

cares and pleasures of maternity : when his baby cries but does not crow ; when his home is in a state of ' hush,' and the exercise of hospitality becomes impossible ; when visitors come with ' kind inquiries,' but never expect to be asked to dinner.

Judged by this standard, Richard Talbot, on and after the arrival of his son and heir, must be pronounced one of the best of husbands. He was affectionately solicitous, without being fidgety or troublesome in his anxieties ; he was so constant in his attendance on the invalid, that the monthly nurse allowed him to be quite an exception to the wicked ' sect,' as she called it, to which he belonged ; he had no objections to holding the baby when that lady offered him that privilege ; and, in short, he won golden opinions as a husband and a father on all hands. Perhaps folks praised him more because they had not looked to him for such virtues. Even Mrs. Parkes was what is called ' agreeably surprised' by the domestic behaviour of her foster-son and son-in-law. If Lucy herself was surprised, she

did not say so, though she was far from taking these proofs of Richard's devotion as a matter of course. Notwithstanding her anxieties, this was perhaps the happiest time of her married life. It was pleasant to her to receive such assurances of her husband's love; for, though she had never doubted of it, she had prepared herself for certain omissions, shortcomings (what ill-natured friends perhaps would have called 'neglect'), on the part of one so careless and so fond of pleasure; whereas, so far from neglecting her, Richard was more than ever kind and attentive. Then her boy, as she called her infant of a few inches, was a source of inexpressible bliss to her, and not the less because she had persuaded herself that it bore quite a remarkable likeness to its father. Even to this statement—though the child was mottled like his contemporaries, and had the usual blob for a nose—Richard listened without disclaimer.

The admiration of grandmamma for this object of worship seemed to redouble, too.

Lucy's affection for her mother ; and, thus lapped in love and glory, the young mother began slowly to recover strength. Perhaps the crowning moment of her happiness was when Lady Earnshaw came to call upon her with a coral with silver bells, as a present for her great-grandson. They had a long conversation together, and when they parted, the old lady, ere she rose from her chair by Lucy's sofa, bent down and kissed her.

'When the worst comes to the worst, my dear, you may count on me to be your friend,' she said, little knowing what 'the worst' was to be. And it was nearer even than she expected.

Everybody—that is, 'all whom it concerned,' and many others—knew by this time that Richard Talbot had nearly come to the end of his tether : that the estate at Durnton Regis was deeply 'dipped ;' that he had tried his hand at every device for spending money, and had been very successful in all. Very few persons pitied him, which was scarcely to be wondered at,

since he had not yet begun to pity himself ; and still fewer pitied Lucy. ' It was,' said the more respectable portion of society, ' just what such a woman deserved.'

She had set her trap for the heir of Talbot Tower, and had caught him. And much good it had done her. She would probably soon disgrace the family by re-appearing on the stage.

This was hard, since they allowed that if she did so it would be for the sake of keeping the family in bread and cheese. Even ' the more respectable portion of society ' is, however, sometimes hard, though it must be added, in justice to them, that they were, in this case, naturally annoyed with Lucy. They had predicted that she would run through the remnant of her husband's money, and then run away with somebody else ; whereas she had been notoriously economical in her own expenditure, and her marriage had been, domestically speaking, a happy one.

Whatever might be her husband's straits, and notwithstanding she must have known

that his profusion still continued, Mrs. Talbot now seemed to have regained her spirits. She had quite recovered her old health and strength, and was no longer depressed and careworn, as she had been at Durnton. Those who knew her best, and her circumstances, were the most astonished at this. Some thought that she had grown reckless of the future ; others, that she had become philosophic ; others, again, that, with her darling babe and her devoted husband, she had made a fool's paradise for herself, and shut her eyes to facts and the future.

The first time she reappeared at the dinner-table Leonard Greene was present. Richard, always desirous to make a gala day, would have invited half a dozen people ; but Mrs. Parkes had the power of veto, and exercised it. It seemed to the guest that he had never seen his hostess more beautiful, and, what gave him a still greater pleasure, more gay and cheerful. The baby appeared with the dessert, its father's offer of grapes and peaches being

declined with scorn by the young gentleman, and hailed with ridicule by the rest of the company. The infant's health was drunk in the most unexceptionable claret, and replied to by Mr. Greene on his behalf in a speech that convulsed the little audience. It was a domestic scene which that gentleman could not help reflecting might be 'worked up' admirably for the stage; but, apart from that touch of professional feeling, he himself, as the friend of the family, was conscious of adding to its domesticity—he was, as it were, part of the local colouring. He could not help reflecting that the materials of genuine happiness were in those about him, and would remain there, whatever misfortune Fate might have in store for them. As Mrs. Talbot was under orders to retire early, the gentlemen accompanied the ladies into the drawing-room, where Richard begged for just one song. It was the first time that Lucy had touched the piano for some weeks—a great deprivation to her—and she took her seat at it very readily.

That scene remained long impressed on the mind of one of its beholders. The pale young mother, with the flush of pleasure upon her delicate cheeks ; her thin fingers, with their costly jewels (for Richard liked to see his gifts upon them), taking their preparatory canter over the keys ; the attentive little audience, eager to hear and to applaud. The notes of the instrument were evoked as usual ; but when those of the voice began to play their part, it was plain that there was something amiss. Again and again the singer essayed her art, but something—not strength, alas ! but the power of expression—appeared to fail her. Suddenly, no song, but a wild, passionate cry of despair and woe came from her beautiful lips, and she fell backward into her mother's arms.

‘My God ! what is it ?’ exclaimed Richard frantically.

‘She has fainted,’ replied Mrs. Parkes ; ‘she has a little overtaxed her strength.’

They carried her into her room, and after a few minutes she came to herself.

Leonard Greene did not leave the house till the doctor had been sent for and made his report. His opinion coincided with that of Mrs. Parkes.

‘We have been getting on a little too fast,’ was his verdict. With a highly nervous temperament like that of Mrs. Talbot, it was impossible to be too careful; and music was a very exciting cause, etc., etc.

Mr. Greene walked home with this gentleman, and, as a friend of the family, put a question or two to him, which were answered frankly enough. Mrs. Talbot, he affirmed, would be herself again in a few days.

‘But her singing?’ observed Mr. Greene. ‘It seemed to me that there was something organically wrong.’

‘It is possible. The whole constitution, under these circumstances, sometimes undergoes a change; and of course, therefore, portions of it—the greater includes the less.’

‘But her voice?’ reiterated Mr. Greene.

‘I think it quite possible that her voice

has suffered. It is a sad thing if it be so ; but then many worse things happen to us : I mean that it cannot materially signify to a lady in Mrs. Talbot's position whether she can compass certain notes or not.'

'But do you really mean to say that it is doubtful whether, even with growing strength, her vocal powers will return to her ?'

'Well, yes, sir. It is my opinion that Mrs. Talbot will never sing again.'



CHAPTER XIX.

GIVEN OVER.

DOCTORS (whom I hold, above all professional men, in reverence, as being wiser than most others, because of their human experience, and kinder than any) labour, as a general rule, under this grave mistake—they underrate the importance (*i.e.*, to their patients) of all such diseases as are not fatal. It is a libel to represent them as careless of the material circumstances of their patients—the better class of them do not recommend Tokay to feeble curates, or Madeira (that is, the island) to the editors of London newspapers—but they estimate too lightly the smaller evils to which flesh is heir. They don't know how

severe a punishment they inflict when they tell the man of action he must 'lie up for a month or two,' or the man of letters that he must 'take a long holiday.'

A little thought would often remedy these errors, since, if they would only take the trouble to put themselves into their patient's place, it is certain they would sometimes reconsider their sentence. It would have been impossible, however, for the doctor who said 'Mrs. Talbot will never sing again' to have pictured to himself the gravity of his dictum; and the more especially since his patient made no sign when it was communicated to her. She only bowed and closed her eyes, which he attributed to physical weakness, that had made her indifferent to most matters. If he could have seen her a few minutes later, when, after dismissing her mother on pretence of needing repose, she lay alone in her room, with her white face turned to the wall, he would have taken 'another view' of the case; he might even have feared, perhaps, for the life of the babe

that lay locked in her arms, but which seemed to her despairing soul less a comfort than a curse; for the one hope of its future, and of hers, was crushed within her.

Leonard Greene's sagacity had not been deceived when it convinced him, long ago, that Lucy had persuaded herself that, when all was gone and spent, she might support her husband and her babe by her own exertions; that 'when the worst came to the worst,' as Lady Earnshaw had phrased it, she would not need to be indebted to her or any one for the bread of charity, but would be enabled to provide that at least, and, as she fondly hoped, far more, by the exercise of her vocal skill. It is probable that she over-rated its merits; but there were circumstances, though she herself would have been loath to take them into account, which would, without doubt, have assisted her efforts.

As the wife of ruined Richard Talbot, she would have attracted audiences who would never have come to listen to mere

Madame Lucinda. But, now her voice was gone, she had nothing of attraction left, and her Richard and his babe and she must starve together.

Of course, it will be asked why, in the name of common sense, did she not, in this hour of despair and woe, appeal to Richard himself? He had money yet—what some persons would still call an ample fortune. It would be surely possible to convince even him that they stood, she knew not how near to, but not very far from, the brink of Ruin. And even if he were so mad as to still close his eyes to the gulf that yawned for them, would he not do for her sweet sake—he had refused her nothing yet—what he would not do for his own? Though deaf to the voice of reason and of conscience, he would surely listen to her piteous pleading. But in the first place (which puts reason out of court), Lucy was a woman; and in the second she was proud, with a pride beyond the pride of all the Talbots. If he would not pause in his mad career of extravagance and waste for his own sake, she would not

compel him to do so for the sake of her and hers. But for them, even as it was, he might have gone on longer, perhaps years longer, in the path that he had chosen for himself ; and it was not for her to curtail his pleasures. Hopeless and helpless, she passed an hour in thoughts that idly chased one another like clouds along a wintry sky ; and then, one having at last taken a defined shape and form, Lucy Talbot became another woman.

Bear with her, reader, though no others did, while you read the conclusion of her history, for the tale is a true one.

‘I have not disturbed you, Lucy?’ said Mrs. Parkes, entering the room in her noiseless manner (she was the perfection of a nurse). ‘You are better for your little nap, however, short as it has been, I see.’

‘Yes, I am better ; indeed, I feel quite well.’

There was a certain hardness in her tone which might have struck a more sensitive ear than that which it addressed ; but Mrs. Parkes only remarked to herself that her

daughter's voice was firmer than it had been for many a day, and her face less pale, for it wore the vigorous hue of resolution.

'I shall drive the new ponies in the park for an hour, mother.'

'The new ponies! and you have been only three times out in the carriage, propped with cushions. It will be madness, Lucy.'

'On the contrary, I feel that a little excitement will do me good.'

She rang the bell, and gave her orders accordingly.

'But I understood, my darling, you were not going to keep the ponies; that you thought them a useless piece of extravagance, and scolded Master Richard—I mean Mr. Talbot—for buying such a present.'

'Did I? Well, I've changed my mind—it is the privilege of an invalid, you know,' added she, with a gentleness that contrasted strangely with the abruptness of her previous speech. 'You have always spoilt me, mother, and now I am going to spoil myself.'

It was a strange speech, but Mrs. Parkes was accustomed to her daughter's modes of expression, which, like her ways, were not those of ordinary young women. She was as much surprised as Richard, however, and by no means as agreeably so, when she heard Lucy ask her husband to take her to the opera the next night, and express a wish that she possessed a box there. She thought it very curious that her daughter should like to hear the opera singers just after she had been told by the doctor that, in all probability, she herself would never sing again ; and, moreover, she lamented that Lucy should encourage her husband in any habit of extravagance, for she well knew (as indeed took place) that he would straightway engage a box for her for the season. And this, alas ! was only the beginning of a new order of things, wherein Lucy, instead of endeavouring to control his profusion, really appeared to spur him on to acts of lavish expenditure. He never dreamt of refusing her anything, and took genuine pleasure in gratifying her newborn

taste for splendour. Nor did it ever occur to him, as it did to others, that Lucy's freaks and fancies were almost exclusively of a selfish sort; that she now not only took pleasure in the most costly wearing apparel, but in the purchase of gems and jewels to an extent which would have been improvident even had Richard's original fortune been intact. There was no limit, in fact, to her self-indulgence in this respect; and, what was worse, it gradually became whispered abroad that Mrs. Richard Talbot had been bitten by the same dog that had bitten her husband—that she had become a gambler on the Turf. It was certain, at all events, that she received very large sums from him by cheque, and was yet constantly overdrawing the private account that he had established for her, at her own request, at his bankers.

Behaviour of this sort, in the circle in which the Talbots moved, takes a considerable time to become talked about, yet it was now quite an ordinary topic among the gossips of the young couple's acquaint-

ance. Some said that it was no wonder that the poor woman had taken to such ways, since gambling, like drinking, is a catching complaint; and others excused her for enjoying herself while she could, since her time was obviously short. And, indeed, it was surprising to many how Talbot had contrived to 'carry on,' with so much sail set, so long as he had. Those who knew Mrs. Richard Talbot best, however—namely, her mother and Mr. Leonard Greene—took a different view of the case. They were well convinced, notwithstanding the whirl of gaiety in which she now lived by choice, that Lucy was not enjoying herself; that under that bright smile and airy manner of hers, dull care sat brooding. They deemed the change in her habits to have been induced by sheer despair, and that she plunged in gaiety in hopes, poor soul, to find beneath its sparkling shallows the jewel Self-forgetfulness. If popularity and adulation could have secured it for her, it would have been hers; for she was grown more beautiful than ever, and no longer

restrained, but rather encouraged, the admiration she excited. Only, unlike some other idols of fashion, she did not ignore her husband, or neglect her child. Upon this point, and upon this point only, was Mr. Greene able to report favourably of Lucy to Lady Earnshaw, who had privately sent for him to Gresham Street.

‘I like the woman,’ she had said to him. ‘I have done what I can for her, and I would fain do more. But what I hear of her present conduct is shameful. To think—after all her expressions of sorrow about poor Dick, and her promises to do her best for his amendment—that she should be spurring him thus upon the road to ruin! The whole town is ringing with her extravagance.’

‘Her conduct is as unaccountable to me,’ answered Mr. Greene sadly, ‘as it is to you, madam; but I know that a short time back she had a severe mental shock, which has made her in some sort, to my mind, unaccountable for her actions.’

‘There is, however, a great deal of

method in her madness,' answered Lady Earnshaw dryly. 'I heard the other day from my own jeweller that she does as much business in gold as in gems; that she sells as well as buys; and, in short, I have my suspicions that she is making a purse for herself against the time when the crash comes, and poor Dick is a beggar.'

'I am quite sure you wrong her there, madam,' answered Mr. Greene confidently. 'I had hoped you had taken a more just view of Mrs. Talbot's character. It is an independent one, indeed, but in quite another sense than that which you have suggested.'

And then he told her how she had put trust in her voice when all else should fail, and how *that* had failed her in his presence.

'That was very sad,' answered Lady Earnshaw, softening; 'still, your view of the case is irreconcilable with her present behaviour. What excuse does she give you for it?'

'To me, madam, none; why should

she ? I perceive that she avoids me, and has done so from the time of which I speak, which is also the date of her change of conduct.'

'Then she is at least ashamed of herself ?'

'Indeed, madam, I cannot judge.'

'That is to say, you will not. Here is a clever man, and I will add an "indifferent honest" one, who dare not speak his mind about a crime because the offender is a pretty woman. And yet Father Vane, as he calls himself, is always droning into my poor niece's ear that beauty is vain, and youth a shadow. For my part, I believe your sex worships nought else.'

These were the first words of harshness, of the philosophic sort, that Mr. Greene had ever heard her speak ; but it revealed to him the root of bitterness within her. He pitied this poor lady who had thrown her love away, first upon a worthless husband and then upon a spendthrift boy, with all his heart.

'I have never been an admirer of my

sex,' he answered gravely; 'and the study of my own character, I am sorry to say, does not give me a better opinion of them. Still, in this case, I believe my judgment is not swayed by personal feelings.'

'You think, then, this woman is justified in flinging away poor Dick's last thousands, and upon herself too?'

'I do not say justified, but I think Despair excuses much. She has tried every way to restrain her husband, and every way has failed. When hope has utterly deserted a shipwrecked crew, they will anticipate their certain doom by eating up all their rations.'

This was a plea of justification which entered into but few minds, and was accepted seriously by none save Mr. Greene. All respectable persons had but one opinion of Mrs. Richard Talbot's new-born love of splendour and excess, and it was a bad one. Among these, however, I do not of course include the world of fashion, who, with some few exceptions, are under any circumstances very ready to admit into their ranks a young couple who live at the rate

of twenty thousand a year, and are, besides, possessed of personal attractions. Mrs. Richard Talbot, with her beauty and her diamonds, with her gaiety and her equipages, and, above all, with her charming little dinners (which had few rivals), was become quite the rage in London. Only Mayfair rather resented her fidelity to that soft-headed young fellow her husband, and was out of patience with that little wretch of a baby of hers, whose most trifling indisposition would sometimes cause her to absent herself from the best society, and even to put off some entertainment promised to it at her own home.

As to those who might be supposed to retain any real regard for the young couple, they were utterly shocked and scandalised with this young woman's proceedings. Sister Edith wept in secret (not, indeed, for Lucy, but for Richard), and took but little comfort from the fact that certain remorseful scruples as to not having acknowledged Lucy as her relative were now utterly swept away by that young person's conduct. It

was clear that she had been right, and her aunt wrong, in the view she had taken of the match, from the very first; but her gentle spirit would have far preferred that the event had proved her own judgment harsh, and justified Lady Earnshaw's charity.

As to the Durnton folks, they were jubilant over the coming catastrophe so far as Lucy was concerned, though a certain pity was not wanting to them as respected Richard. The very woods about the Tower were growing bare; field after field and farm after farm had been cloven from the estate; and they regretted, in a vague sentimental way, that the old house of Talbot would never again hold up its head among them. It was dreadful to think that some self-made man, without forefathers or *k's*, would doubtless presently come to live in the ancestral seat; but on the other hand, it had long remained useless to them for all neighbourly purposes, and the younger members at least of the families around would have been very willing to see

a lawn-tennis court upon the Terrace, and garden-parties and balls at the Tower in their proper seasons. Upon the whole, since ruin must needs come, the sooner that abominable young woman (who was now credited with the whole of it) should bring it about, the better for all parties.

Perhaps Mr. Freeman was a solitary exception to these opinions of 'the county,' but if he had any shred of pity left for Lucy, he kept it to himself; it is certain, at all events, that he did not confide it to the wife of his bosom.



CHAPTER XX.

THE SECRET OUT.

‘TIME and the hour,’ says the poet, ‘live through the longest day,’ and eventually, though in most cases at a somewhat later date than has been fixed by his deploring friends, the spendthrift comes to the end of his fortune. In Richard Talbot’s case the ending had always been a question of time, from the moment that he had been in a position to do what he pleased with his own, and it would have been so had his fortune been originally twice or ten times as large. To endow him with wealth was to put water in a sieve; but still the water had dribbled through during those first years, whereas at last, when his wife had

begun to help him, it was poured out as though the sieve had been a mere hoop. It was wonderful to those who watched the splendour of her career, which threw that former one of her husband quite into the shade, that Dick's money should have lasted so long. It came to an end at last, however, and very suddenly: he galloped on in his usual reckless fashion till he was brought up by a fence too high to be cleared even by his famous timber-taker, Credit (out of Expectation)—namely, the 'bull-finch,' No Effects.

It presented itself to him, after all, a little unexpectedly, and, as it were, second-hand; that is to say, it was Lucy who drew his attention to it.

They were sitting at breakfast one morning rather late after a post-opera ball; the table loaded with dainties for which they had small appetite; the room a garden of flowers. On Richard's side of the table was a large heap of letters, the handwriting of most of which he knew, and therefore had no intention of opening them;

he was tired of that monotonous beginning of 'To account rendered.' Lucy, too, had her little pile of letters, but her attention was for the most part given to the infant Dick, who, cradled in a comfortable arm-chair, was babbling of green fields, or other evidently agreeable topic, in his unintelligible ripple. It was like the breakfast scene from 'The Rake's Progress,' with a touch of domesticity added, which did not make it less pathetic.

'My dear Dick,' said Lucy presently, in a complaining voice, 'what does *this* mean? Mr. Gewgaw declines to send me my diamonds.'

She threw a note across the table, which her husband glanced at with an indifferent air.

'I suppose the man wants the money,' replied he quietly, 'before he parts with his goods. I should close my account with Gewgaw, and go to somebody else.'

'Yes; but before closing one's account, it is necessary to settle it,' observed Lucy dryly. 'I thought perhaps you could let me have a thousand pounds.'

‘My darling, I am afraid I haven’t got a thousand pence.’ He smiled even as he said that, and it was not a bitter smile—it was tender, yet very grave.

‘You are joking, Dick; you *must* be joking,’ said Lucy, with an aggrieved air. ‘You mean that you are short at your banker’s.’

‘Yes, I mean that, undoubtedly. But I am also short everywhere else.’

‘Then sell something; land or stocks, or whatever it is. It is too ridiculous to tell me I can’t have a thousand pounds.’

‘You should have a hundred thousand if I had got it to give you, my pet. But then I haven’t got it. One can’t get blood out of a stone.’ And for about the first time in his life Richard Talbot sighed.

‘Why on earth should you not sell the Tower? You told me yourself that you should never go back to it again.’

‘Nor shall I. And for a very good reason, Lucy; it has already passed into other hands.’

‘What? Have you parted with your patrimony?’

‘With every shilling of it. Of course I’ve been a fool.’

Lucy threw up her hands with a gesture that seemed to say, ‘Fool is no name for you.’

‘Still, Richard, it cannot be that we are beggars?’

‘Well, no, dear; but there is scarcely a shot left in the locker, and that’s the truth. Your poor grandmother once told me that I should be the ruin of you. I feel as if I should like to hang myself; only that would be a better fate than I deserve. The hangman ought to do it for me.’

Lucy looked away from him and fixed her eyes upon her child.

‘Yes, and I’ve ruined poor little Dick too,’ he continued. ‘I have been a reckless blackguard, Lucy, and deserve all you may think proper to say to me. What a selfish brute I was to marry you—to marry anybody.’ He rose from his seat and began to pace the room with rapid strides.

‘How much, Richard, have you really left to live upon?’ asked Lucy presently.

‘Nothing—nothing.’

‘Do you mean to say you don’t know where to get even a thousand pounds—for these diamonds.’

‘Indeed, my pet, you must now do without diamonds. I have not a stiver left.’

Lucy’s face was white, but her tone was firm, and even hard, as she replied :

‘Have you spent then that sand pounds I heard you speaking of only the other day to Mr. Inglis?’ (Mr. Inglis was his London lawyer). ‘He said it was out on mortgage.’

‘I have not spent that, but it is not mine to spend.’ Here he blushed like a girl, and added hesitatingly, ‘That is to say, the interest is due to some one else.’

‘I don’t wish to be inquisitive, Richard,’ she answered haughtily. ‘I have never pried into your secret expenses.’

‘Lucy, Lucy, you do me wrong,’ he answered vehemently. ‘I have done you grievous harm, but in this matter you are reproaching me unjustly. That money is bespoken for an annuity——’

Lucy's beautiful mouth curled scornfully. 'So I conjectured,' she said.

'For an annuity to an old friend of my father's,' he continued quietly. 'If you do not believe me, I am sorry; but I cannot tell you more—it is a family secret. The man in question—for it is a man—is now fighting for his country against the Germans. I wish I was fighting with him—or against him—so that I might be killed.'

'What good would that do little Dick and me?' inquired Lucy coldly.

'No good, that is true; living or dead, I can be of no good to anybody. Still, when a man is dead he can at least do no more harm.'

He looked at her, hoping perhaps for a glance of pity, but she was bending over her child.

'You say you have no money, Richard, nor any means of raising any,' said she presently, but still with averted face; 'you have doubtless, however, plenty of debts.'

'I have no debts, Lucy, that cannot be met: I am sure of that, because you know

I have always kept account of everything. When I am sold up—which will probably happen in a few weeks or days—everybody will be paid, and there will be a little something—a very little—for you and Dick. I think you may continue too to have your mother to live with you. It is a miserable end, of course. Greene told me long ago that I ought to have made a settlement upon you. I would to Heaven I had! I say again I am a selfish blackguard.'

'And when you have washed your hands of baby and me,' said Lucy slowly, 'what is it you mean to do with yourself?'

'That is the first kind thing you have said, Lucy,' answered Dick, in a broken voice. 'I did not deserve it, I know; but somehow I did not think—for baby's sake—you would have been so hard upon me.'

'It is my baby who makes me hard,' answered Lucy.

'Because I have ruined him? Well, that is natural enough, only my selfishness did not allow me to put the matter in that light. I think it is very good of you,

Lucy, to express any interest in the future of such a father and such a husband. I have put myself outside the pale of pity.'

'You have not told me what you mean to do with yourself.'

'Well, since you are so good as to inquire a second time, I mean to write to De Blaise—that is the name of my father's friend—and join him as a volunteer; that is, after I have got my life insured. The premium will be heavy, but I shall take care it is paid but once. I have been making up my mind about that this long time. Little Dick will get five thousand pounds or so in that way.'

'Then, do you mean to say you have been living in this reckless way for years, with Death before your eyes?'

'Well, yes. I could not help spending money. If I had it all again to-morrow, it would all go the same way. When I was a bachelor it didn't signify. But lately—after Dick was born—I made up my mind how it was to end.'

'Madman! And since then you have been more extravagant than ever!'

‘Well, come, Lucy, and so have you. I am not going to reproach you—Heaven forbid! I was always glad to see you enjoying yourself, at any cost; I never grudged you. But during this last year you have spent a fortune.’

‘Of course you have given me a good deal of money,’ she answered carelessly; ‘but then I have been so unlucky in my speculations.’

‘And they were rather large, my dear. You know I keep an account of all these things, though I take such little heed about them. From first to last, darling’—here he took out his little ledger—‘you have had fourteen thousand pounds.’

‘I have, Richard; but it is not all spent.’ She rose from her knees beside her babe, and went to her desk. ‘I did not like to put it in the bank, I thought it would be safer here. Here are twelve thousand pounds of it.’

‘Twelve thousand pounds!’ ejaculated Richard. ‘Why you must have recouped yourself for everything at Ascot.’

‘I never won or lost a shilling, Richard. I never bought a jewel that I did not sell again. Whatever money you gave me I kept—or as much of it as I could without exciting suspicion. I knew that you would ruin us; as you have just said yourself, it was not in your nature to avoid it. So I kept this against the rainy day. You must forgive me, Richard, since it was for your sake.’

‘You mean for baby’s sake.’

‘Certainly not; the money is yours. I only hold it, as it were, in trust for you.’

Richard, who was standing by her as she displayed the roll of notes—a fortune in a nutshell—here clasped her in his arms.

‘You are an angel, Lucy, as certainly as I am the other thing.’

She did not, however, return his embrace.

‘You had better take the notes, Richard, and count them,’ said she gravely. ‘The amount is rather over twelve thousand pounds, and will last you as many months.’

‘Thank you,’ said Richard, ‘but it shall last longer.’

He walked to the bell, and rang it. ‘Take a cab and go to Mr. Inglis, the lawyer,’ said he to the servant, ‘and bring him back with you at once.’

‘What is it you mean to do?’ inquired Lucy, her voice trembling for the first time.

‘I mean—but don’t let me see it, don’t let me finger it—to settle the money, at once—within half-an-hour—upon you and Dick.’

‘But, Richard, you can never live upon the interest of twelve thousand pounds.’

‘Then I can get shot by the Germans, as originally intended,’ was his cool reply. ‘Please lock that desk, and give me a cigar.’

Before the cigar was finished the lawyer arrived.

‘Take that key, Inglis,’ said Richard, ‘out of my wife’s hand, and keep it as the apple of your eye; and then take my instructions.’ It was astonishing to see

how quiet and resolute and business-like this young fellow had suddenly become. In a few minutes the draft of a deed had been written out, by which 'bread and cheese, at least,' as Richard modestly termed it, were secured for Mrs. Talbot and little Dick for their natural lives, and a provision made for certain contingencies. Even then he refused to leave the house till the deed itself was drawn up and witnessed, and in the meantime despatched a messenger for Leonard Greene, who, with Mr. Inglis himself, was to be the trustee for the carrying out of his good intentions.

It was not without some embarrassment that Mr. Greene presented himself, for he had been a stranger to his friend's roof for many a day, by reason of Mrs. Talbot's obvious disinclination for his society; and Richard's first words were by no means calculated to set him at ease.

'I have sent for you this morning, Pussy,' he said, 'to act for us in a business capacity. You wished me, many months ago, to make a settlement upon my wife and child, and I

am now going to follow your advice. The reckless expenditure and lavish extravagance in which Lucy has indulged of late, have alone enabled me to make this most necessary provision.'

Greene thought for a moment that the long-expected stroke of ruin had fallen at last, and driven Dick mad. ' But he looked from him to Lucy, and her expression of face at once reassured him. The tears were stealing down her pale cheeks, but he saw they were not those of woe ; her eyes were glowing through them with love and pride and happiness.

'She has been most confoundedly extravagant,' continued Dick, who had by this time quite recovered his airy tone ; 'but then you would not believe what that woman has *saved* during the last year or so.'

Then a light began to dawn on Greene's quick wits.

'She has been saving it for *you*, you good-for-nothing fellow !' cried he excitedly.

‘I thought that she must have had some good reason for what she did.’

‘And that, I suppose,’ said Dick, ‘goodness being naturally hateful to you—is why you never came near us.’

Here Mr. Greene became all sorts of colours.

‘It was my fault that Mr. Greene did not come,’ interposed Lucy softly. ‘I did not wish that one of the few persons who, I flattered myself, had some good opinion of me, should—should—be compelled to witness—what must have seemed to him—very deplorable behaviour on my part.’

‘It did not,’ asserted Mr. Greene; ‘that is, I always said that you were not to blame.’

‘Then you must have had to defend me very often,’ said Lucy naïvely. ‘Of course, it was sad to feel what everybody—whose opinion was worth having—must needs think of me. But I had no other way to save dear Dick.’

‘That’s true,’ assented Richard confidently; ‘if she had not spent the money,

or seemed to spend it, why, I should have really spent it, you see. I should spend it now if it was not locked up.'

'I did not ask him to lock it up,' said Lucy earnestly.

'There spoke the sex all over,' laughed Mr. Greene. 'I never supposed you capable, dear Mrs. Talbot, of taking such a precaution on your own account. One should not put one's self under an obligation, even to one's husband, you know.'

Lucy blushed at having her own opinion thus repeated to her, but blushed still more when Dick observed, with tender gravity :

'You are wrong for once, Pussy, in your reading of human nature. My wife did not tell you that she had not asked me to make a settlement, to show her own resolution. She told you in order that you might understand that I, Richard Talbot, did for once forget self so far as to insist upon her reaping the benefit of her own self-denial and ingenuity ; if I had touched one shilling of that sacred store, I should have deserved to go to the devil here and

hereafter ; but she wishes you to believe that I have done quite a noble action.'

For once the eyes of the lover and the husband had looked deeper than those of the philosophic observer : for this was the very thing that Lucy had meant.



CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION.

OF course, few people ever heard, and still fewer ever believed, the story of Lucy Talbot's pretending to be a spendthrift. When her husband took a farm in the country, and set to work to make a living out of it (in which, after a time, he was partially successful), that was miracle enough for his friends; when he came up to town for the Cattle Show, and some of them saw him looking with interest at the agricultural implements, they could hardly give credence to their own eyes. It was not to be expected that they should take on credit any marvels respecting his wife. It was easier to imagine that the Dick

Talbot they had known of old, and who had taken to fat pigs and steam ploughs, had also suddenly emancipated himself by a great effort from his habits of excess, and pulled up on the brink of ruin just in time. It was a reformation of character that happens only to one in a million, and which in his case had to be carried out in the teeth of a wife he doated upon, and who was herself the most extravagant of hussies. It was true that Dick always told everybody the true history of the matter, and with great pride, but then Dick was a *farceur* and loved his joke. Mankind, and especially womankind, were as difficult to be persuaded of the actual facts as any unsuccessful rhymester of the good taste of the public.

This scepticism, of which Dick was fortunately ignorant, Lucy thoroughly understood, but suffered nothing from it. She had been too long accustomed to a state of isolation, and of late to a life with a purpose in it, to be moved by the opinion of the crowd.

Those she lived for—her husband and her child—repaid what she had done for them by their love, and this more than requited her for everything.

And yet, as time grew on, Lucy Talbot began to be 'accepted,' and even appreciated in certain quarters. Before they left their little house in Mayfair (which was as soon as they could dispose of the lease), she had several visitors. One a Sister of Charity, the announcement of whose arrival by the servant set her heart beating with a glow of pride. She knew that Richard had been to Gresham Street, and she guessed that Sister Edith had come to own that her nephew's wife did not quite deserve the harsh judgment she had passed upon her. But it was not Edith, but Margaret Pole, who now lived with her, and shared her labours among the poor.

Hers was one of those curious cases which are not explicable by the usual formulas, and which, therefore, outraged common sense—that is, the sense of commonplace people. Miss Pole was not

ugly, nor was she old, nor had she been 'got at' by priests, and yet she had vowed herself (though without the vow) to Heaven. There was no means of accounting for it in any reasonable way ; though, to be sure, some people said that she had always been in love with Mrs. Talbot's husband. Perhaps her long tendance of her sick grandfather, with contemplation in the watches of the night of what came of a life of self-indulgence, had had its part in persuading her to abjure the pleasures of this world ; and certainly the old squire had had a strange influence over her, alive and dead. This, among other things, had happened in connection with him. He had been deprived, as we have said, by paralysis, of the use of his limbs for months before his death, and one day he had bidden her fetch him a book which lay in his justice-room. 'Don't be long, my wench,' he had said, for to let her out of his sight had become terrible to him. She had found the book, though not without some delay, and was turning to go upstairs when her grandfather

himself in his dressing-gown, and just as she had left him on the sofa of his bed-chamber, except that there was a painful look of yearning in his eyes, presented himself to her astonished gaze. 'Oh, grandfather!' cried she, and then he vanished. She flew upstairs; the nurse who had taken her place by the side of the invalid was at her post, and of course her patient in his place, since he had lost the use of his limbs.

'Mr. Pole has been quite quiet, miss,' she whispered. So quiet that he did not even breathe; Walter Pole was a dead man.

This incident, coming on much that had gone before, doubtless had its influence on Margaret; its morbid influence, if you will, since it helped, however irrationally, to make her dead to the world. She remembered, however, that she had lived in it, and had now come to Lucy to express her sorrow for having held aloof from her, and tacitly allied herself with her detractors, during her stay at Durnton.

‘Richard told me of your value,’ she said simply, ‘but I was deaf and blind like the rest.’

Lady Earnshaw and Edith came together a few hours afterwards to make, as the former said, their ‘recantation of error.’

It was a happy moment for Lucy, but the interview would have had its embarrassments for her had not her husband come in and relieved her. It was very pleasant to her to see how the two ladies received him, and to feel that they were really devoted to that young prodigal; nor did it wound her *amour propre* in the least that she recognised the fact that she had no standing in their regard whatever, apart from him and her child. These two, however, were hers, and hers only, and she desired the love of no one else for her own sake: her mother and Aunt Susan, whose affections she had never lost, being, of course, excepted.

‘Well, Aunt Edith, and what does

Father Vane say about us now ?' inquired wicked Dick.

'He wishes you all happiness, Richard, and begged me to add, if it could be said without offence or intrusion, that he deeply regrets having expressed opinions about your wife's conduct, which he now perceives were quite unjustifiable.'

'I think he likes your wife, Dick, better than you,' said Lady Earnshaw slyly. 'This extravagant minx, you see' (here she patted Lucy's cheek), 'has done evil that good might come, which of course wins the approbation of Father Vane. By-the-bye, I am bound to say that Mr. Leonard Greene always defended your wife when I abused her, and yet I don't think you need be jealous of him either. I should be very sorry to believe otherwise, for the fact is, I have rather fallen in love with that young gentleman myself.'

Mr. Greene, indeed, became quite a link between the ladies of the house in Gresham Street, where he was a constant guest, and

the Talbots, whose country-house became as much his home as his own lodgings in the Adelphi; his companionship was of the greatest service to poor Dick at times, when a certain *mal du pays* made him groan for the pleasant curves of Goodwood and the long green 'straight' of Ascot. But these temptations were short, and grew weaker and weaker every year, as other matters occupied their place in his mind; and it must be stated to his honour (for he voluntarily passed his word to that effect) that from the date of 'the settlement' Dick never made a single bet. His wicked little ledger was exchanged for a larger one, in which his agricultural accounts were entered with his habitual accuracy of detail.

Mrs. Parkes removed with the little family from Mayfair, and still remains in it, the mildest of mothers-in-law; indeed, Mr. Greene, in view of the whole circumstances of the case, has dubbed her 'The Exception.'

A few weeks after the farm was taken, a

certain melancholy event took place, which (as such things will do, however inconsistently with the fitness of things) materially added to the well-being of the young couple. De Blaise was killed in action, and the money which Dick had religiously set apart for the fulfilment of his father's wishes became their own. Thus they enjoy no despicable revenue; and what they have, thanks to Lucy's management, Dick swears, 'goes further' than his old income. He has a hundred a year allowed to him for pocket-money, and was discovered to have saved out of it—half-a-crown—at the end of the first twelve months.

As for little Dick, he will be sufficiently provided for, as Lady Earnshaw has announced her intention of leaving him all she has to dispose of. In short, if the prosperity belonging to the end of a fairy story does not attend Mr. and Mrs. Talbot, they have a good share of Fortune's favours, and certainly far more than one of

them deserves. Dick is quite cognisant of this fact, and never forgets to whom he owes his salvation.

In a letter he wrote to Mr. Freeman, respecting business affairs, and which was personally friendly enough, he gave a piece of his mind with respect to the behaviour of his Durnton neighbours to Lucy, at the same time expressing what he owed to her. The Rector wrote back very graciously, and giving entire credence to Dick's account of the matter; while Mrs. Freeman sent her kindest regards and congratulations.

'What the deuce does she mean by congratulations?' exclaimed Dick. 'I suppose she congratulates me upon the possession of such a wife as you, my dear.' Lucy laughed, and 'thought *not*,' in which she showed her discernment.

There had been considerable discussion upon her merits between the Rector and his wife; and they had not agreed, even at last.

‘Well,’ said Mr. Freeman finally, ‘you must at least acknowledge that poor Lucy is not so bad as she has been painted.’

‘That is not saying much, Giles,’ was her keen reply; ‘there is a large margin in her case; remember, she was an actress.’

THE END.

